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WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA

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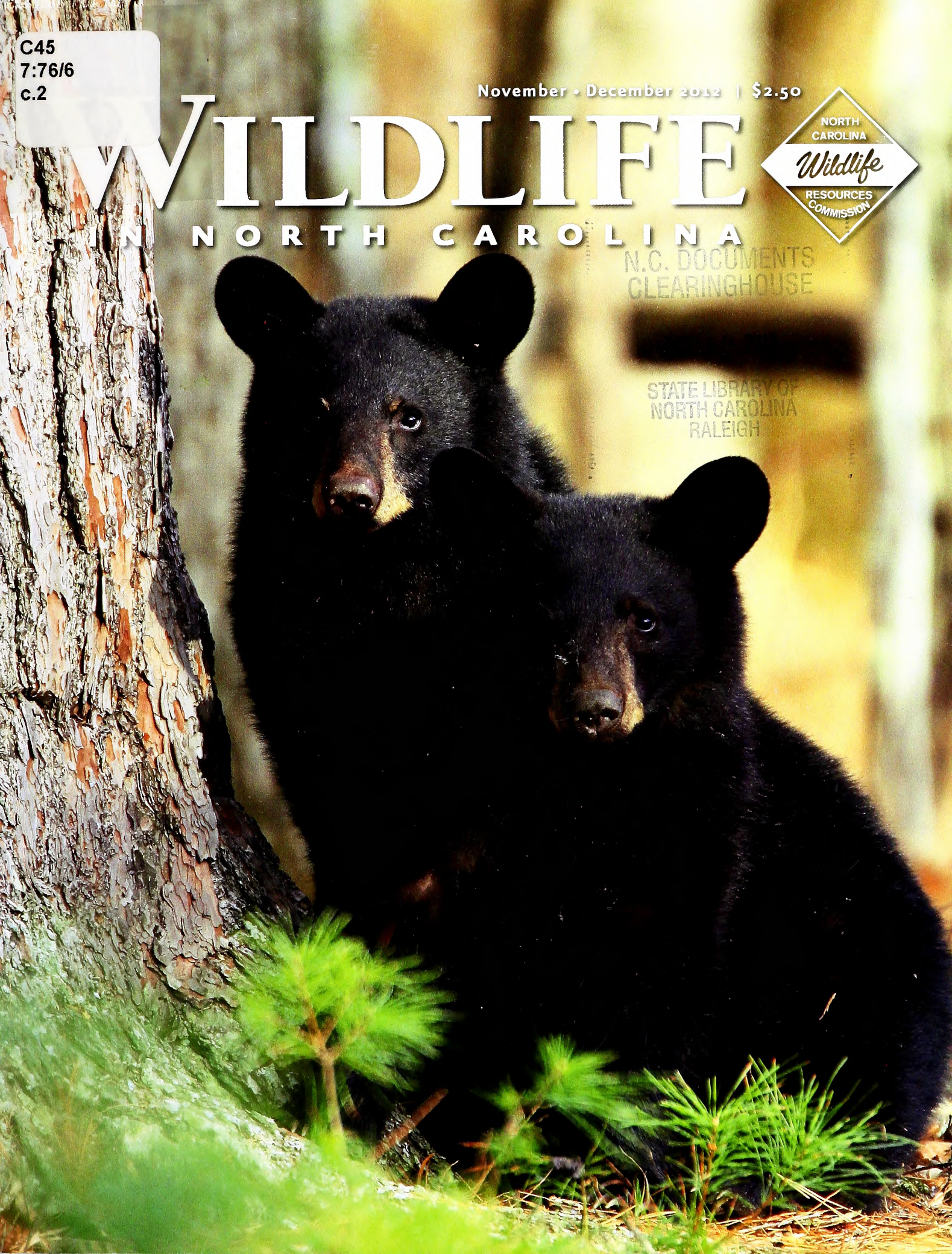

Harp seals, such as this one which was found north of Corolla, are becoming more frequent winter visitors to our state. Turn to page 20 for some possible explanations.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JARED LLOYD.

Volume 76 | Number 6

WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA

contents | november • december 2012

FEATURES

4 **A SON OF SOUTHPORT**
written by Mike Zlotnicki | photographed by Melissa McGaw
Jerry Dilsaver has spent decades teaching Tar Heel anglers how to fish.

10 **MY KIND OF SPORT**
written by Michael Reno Harrell | illustrated by Chris Armstrong
Mix dogs, lies and coffee for a traditional Appalachian fox hunt. The fox is optional.

14 **A BEAR HUNT AT OAKLAND**
written by Dr. Richard Rankin | photographed by Derrick Hamrick
The terrain is difficult and the quarry challenging, but the payoff can be huge. Literally.

20 **VISITORS FROM THE NORTH**
written and photographed by Jared Lloyd
What is driving young seals to seek out the water off the North Carolina coast?

26 **THE HUNTRESS OF STANLY COUNTY**
written by Mike Zlotnicki | photographed by Melissa McGaw
Katie Watson got a late start deer hunting, but at 97 she's going strong.

30 **FISHING THE OUTER BANKS**
written by Stan Ulanski | photographed by Kelly Culpepper
How to rig up your gear and locate fish along one of the Atlantic's premier angling locations.

DEPARTMENTS

2 EDITOR'S NOTE
3 LETTERS
36 WILD NOTEBOOK
40 BACK PORCH
43 NATURE'S WAYS
44 OUR NATURAL HERITAGE
45 OUTDOOR MOMENT

Cover: Two black bear cubs rest beside a pine tree in the Smoky Mountains. Their mother was foraging about 100 yards away.
PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD PUSSER.

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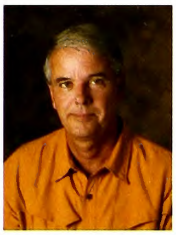

EDITOR'S NOTE

The waning of yet another year prompts introspection for some of us, a toting up of highs and lows and in-betweens of another year now wheezing on its deathbed. I gave up the practice a few years ago, believing that if I honestly considered it, in some years the negatives might trump the positives.

NCWRC

Without planning to do so, I have taken to heart writer Jim Harrison's statement that "the overexamined life . . . is not worth living." The thought of keeping a journal, as I did in college, now seems tedious at best. Instead of embarking on little voyages of self-discovery (and who knows what disappointment might await at the end of that journey), I fish. Fishing not only benefits me greatly but also provides the fish some amusement—but little danger.

Recently my fishing partner said at the end of the day, "You looked so intent while you were fishing, like you were deep in thought."

And I was. I was thinking about fish, my casting, wondering just how big a popping bug I would have to tie on to keep 4-inch redbreast sunfish from eating it. (It would have to be bigger than a size 6.) I also think about the place itself, the trees, rocks, plants, that log that makes a handy seat while I tie on a new fly. And I wonder why after having located all the possible woody impediments to my fly line, I almost always fail to note the huge sycamore limb 15 feet above my head.

Perhaps as I'm walking about a rocky stream I'm thinking how grateful I am that I received a wading staff for my birthday. It might one day save me from cracking my noggin on a rock and ending up like poor Datus Proper, a brilliant fishing writer who fell and drowned in a Colorado stream in six inches of water. It pays to remember that fishing, as with any number of our enjoyments, can be a mortal endeavor.

Most of the time, though, I'm merely fishing, feeling the green-clear water flowing about my legs, watching birds and bugs, simply glad to be. "Moving water is forever in the present tense," Harrison says, "a condition we rather achingly avoid." I find myself these days at home in the present, wishing only for more skill and more time. It's comfortable on the river. Come try it.

Jim Wilson

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The Question of Spots

I have a houseboat on the Panther Creek area of Fontana Lake. I have been fishing the lake since 1953. My son has been fishing with me for 42 years, and now my grandson for five years. We love this lake and its beauty, especially on a full moon, sitting back in your boat seat, listening to the owls hooting and watching the stars "shooting." Of course, now the coyotes are yapping. I especially enjoy the people of western North Carolina in Graham County.

On a trip in early April, my son and I caught probably 20 or more spotted bass. We caught six off one boulder on crankbaits. We only caught four smallmouths and no largemouths. Both the spots and smallmouth were full of eggs and were caught in the same area of the lake. We have on occasion caught fish that we believed were hybrids between the two species. They looked like smallmouths with spotted bass coloration.

One thing that crosses my curiosity is, what is the future of the three species of bass on Fontana and other North Carolina lakes. (And Tennessee, too. We catch spots on all lakes we have fished in East Tennessee.)

The spotted bass is very aggressive, fun to catch and good to eat, like all fish caught on Fontana. The locals don't seem to mind the spots for the above reasons. I think a possible larger creel limit and size might help. However, Fontana is a long, deep lake. I don't believe fishermen could put much of a dent in the spot population on the lake. I don't think any eradication program would be worth the effort. Any ideas?

Ronald E. Campbell
Maryville, Tenn.

Mt. Mitchell Memories

My father was a school principal in Gaston County for 32 years. Because he was employed for nine months only in the year, our family spent every summer camping in the mountains or at the beach. When I was about 12 we went to Mount Mitchell and spent the night in Big Tom Wilson's cabin some distance from the top.

In the late '40s three of us Eagle Scouts who were counselors at Piedmont Council summer camp, got permission from the National Park Service to hike up the mountain, camping along the way. They even gave us permission to build a cooking fire and to carry one pistol! We took a bus to Busick and ambled along the trail in no hurry for about three days.

When we finally got to the ranger he asked where in the world we had been. They were about to send out a search party! He gave us some potatoes from his garden, and we left the mountain on an old logging trail down to Black Mountain, where we went home to Gastonia and Louisiana. Quite an adventure for three 18-year-olds. I enjoyed the story about the mountain ("Mount Mitchell," August 2012).

Dr. Robert Bruce Warlick, DDS
Southern Pines

Artistic Pleasures

Like so many other readers I, too, have a lifetime subscription to *Wildlife in North Carolina* magazine. In my case it came after graduating from college and getting my first job as an art teacher in Danville, Va. (far from my eastern NC home). I missed the life I had growing up in Maple Hill, a small community near the Holly Shelter Game Refuge. My buddies and I would spend our time after school and during the summers exploring nature and avoiding cottonmouths. I eagerly devoured the magazine, getting as much pleasure from the pictures as from the articles.

Living in the big city initially inspired me to spend that $100 (a huge sum in 1982) so I could get Wildlife forever. I soon found a much better use for the magazine. As an art teacher I taught students to draw. What better subject (when we weren't outside drawing trees) than the photographs in the magazine. I have always thought that an artist had to master realism before exploring other ways of expression. Your magazine helped me to teach it to young people who, unfortunately, didn't get around much outside the city.

Even though I'm now retired I still look forward to the next issue of the magazine. Sometimes I'll read it on the front porch overlooking my Piedmont farm. I'll bet some of my city slicker ex-students are doing the same thing.

Allen Walton
Ruffin

Primal Canadas

I am totally with Mr. Wilson on Canadas ("Editor's Note," August 2012). When I hear the geese call, particularly on a fall evening with the moon riding high, and I look up to see them silhouetted against the clouds and moon, I think it brings out some primal instinct. Doesn't matter whether they are going across town or across country.

Ed Morrison
Virginia Beach, Va.

Learning Experience

I live near a creek in Concord and fish a lot. I went to the beach with my friend to go sheepshead fishing off the piers. We caught four or five sheepshead, but we also caught four blowtoads using fiddler crabs. We did not keep then because we did not know they were good to eat ("Blowtoad Madness, September–October 2012). Next year we will keep some.

Robbie Shinn
Northwest Cabarrus Middle School, eighth grade

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"If they keep exposing you to education, you might even realize some day that man becomes immortal only in what he writes on paper, or hacks into rock, or slabbers onto a canvas, or pulls out of a piano."
—Robert Ruark, "The Old Man and the Boy"

A SON OF SOUTHPORT

JERRY DILSAVER

HAS SPENT DECADES TEACHING TAR HEEL ANGLERS HOW TO FISH

WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELISSA McGAW

(From left) Southport remains a quaint coastal town. Middle: Teaching anglers either one-on-one or in seminar settings is a part of Dilsaver's professional life. Right: Some of the hardware Dilsaver has collected over the years, including the award for Southern Kingfish Association National Champion in 2001.

Stop me if you've heard this one before. Boy's born in Southport, back when it was a sleepy fishing village. He's mentored by an Old Man in the ways of nature, hunting and fishing. Boy goes on to a career in the outdoors, teaching others and writing about his adventures afield.

Yeah, this sounds a lot like Robert Ruark's seminal collection of columns "The Old Man and the Boy." It also describes Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island. Along with Joe Albea and the late Franc White, Dilsaver is the "face" of saltwater angling. Not surprising, with his experience and decades of seminar and fishing-school instruction. But there's more than mullet and mackerel to Dilsaver.

It was early April last year, and Dilsaver sat on the deck of a quaint condo facing Southport Marina. His buddy Tommy Rickman of Southport Angler Outfitters (and owner of the condo) had just left to go upriver to pick up some bait shrimp. Dilsaver nodded toward the docks in the distance, where commercial fish houses once stood on the Southport waterfront.

"Dad ran United Shrimp Company for Lewis Hardee," he said sipping a soda. "He worked his way off the boat. I grew up in that shrimp house. That was back when this place was a shrimp haven. Boats would catch 50 boxes a trip then."

He joked that he was "an only child with three sisters and a brother," due to his mother dying and his father, Floyd Dilsaver, remarrying twice.

When Dilsaver was in fourth grade, his father quit the shrimp house, signed on at the Wilmington/Cape Fear River Pilots Association and ran boats that ferried local river pilots to and from the big boats headed upriver to Wilmington. At 14, Dilsaver started working as a mate on the pilot boats. You could say his life on the water started at age 5, though. He remembers going with his dad to fetch a repaired shrimp boat.

"I stood on a pile of fish boxes and steered from Wilmington to Southport while my dad checked around the boat."

In high school, Dilsaver played football, tennis, golf and basketball and ran track. He started at Southport High but graduated from the Frederick Military Academy in Portsmouth, Va., in 1969.

EDUCATION

Dilsaver started his college career at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1969 and graduated from East Carolina University in 1985. It was at ECU that he met his wife, donna Mooneyham (yes, she spells it with a lower case d.) In between his two college stints, he worked as a dockhand at Southport Marina, did maintenance work, surfed up and down the East Coast and was a professional motocross racer, among other gigs.

"I damn near won the Texas Hare Scrambles on a Yamaha YZ 125," he said. "I crashed twice and broke a bone in my hand and one in my foot and lost the race by about a foot."

While at ECU, Dilsaver got a job at a True Value hardware store, where he met a farmer from Washington County who had some waterfowl on his property. So Dilsaver started a waterfowl guide service.

"I have always been drawn to ducks and geese," he said. "Since geese were scarce, I was always drawn to them. Joe Albea booked hunts for us because he worked at *the* outdoor store in Greenville."

That's the same Joe Albea who has been producing 18 years of the "Carolina Outdoor Journal" television show. He and Dilsaver stayed in touch over the years as their respective audiences and reputations grew. Albea recalls seeing Dilsaver at boat shows and fishing seminars before finally taping some shows with him.

"I've met quite a few people over the years, and you can tell who enjoys the outdoors and people who enjoy it *and* are willing to step up and speak up for it," Albea said from his home office in Winterville. "Jerry is one of those who is willing to speak out for it.

"We're basically doing the same thing," Albea said. "We've upped the education part of the show over the years. What he does in

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seminars and schools — we complement each other. I think he's good as gold. He's had a passion at an early age. He's been able to share it with people. You don't get rich doing it. His passion is unique."

In the late '80s, Dilsaver was hired by George Hall as hunting editor for *Carolina Adventure* magazine. They worked together and built the magazine before selling it to The News & Observer Publishing Co. in 1991. At *Carolina Adventure*, Dilsaver helped develop the fishing school concept, eventually getting about 300 anglers to attend the annual event. Dilsaver left the magazine in 2002 to write for *North Carolina Sportsman* magazine and run its special events, such as fishing schools, but he was laid off in 2009.

TEACHING

Go to any boat show, and you can't swing a dead cat without hitting somebody who has attended a seminar or school where Dilsaver held forth. He started doing speaking engagements in 1987 and has done well over 500 seminars and classes. Does that make him a celebrity?

"Naw, I'm just a guy who got a few lucky breaks and was fortunate enough to take advantage of them," he said. "There was a time from the early '90s to '04 or so when I was doing 60–70 appearances a year."

In addition to being paid to teach classes and seminars, Dilsaver does some "giving back," as he calls it. One Wednesday morning in March found him at Camp Lejeune talking to a small but attentive crowd clad in camo.

"How many of you think flounder is a good eating fish?" Dilsaver asked his audience at the base exchange. A couple of hands went up, and Dilsaver went on to explain about a new flounder jig on the market with a hook mounted sideways to accommodate a flounder's sideways mouth. An audience member asked about color.

"Everything I do with artificials, white is the color family in my bag," he said. "White, pearl and bone. Also, new penny and chartreuse. New penny is one of the gimmick colors that I think works."

One of the attendees was Staff Sgt. Tim Judd, who has been living (and fishing) around Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station New River "off and on" since 1997.

"I picked up a lot of stuff," said Judd, a non-lethal-weapons instructor. "I'm not big on the jigs and artificial stuff, but he presented a different mindset. A lot of what he said validated what I've learned. He's a local, and we need to bring in more locals. He's giving his time and his knowledge. Give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and feed him for life, ya know?"

IN ADDITION TO FREELANCE WRITING AND TEACHING, DILSAVER SERVES ON THE FOLLOWING:

- Southern Regional Advisory Committee for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (ncdmf.net),
- Advisory Committee for the N.C. Saltwater Fishing Tournament for the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (ncdmf.net),
- board of directors for the Long Bay Artificial Reef Association (lbara.com),
- board of directors for the N.C. Public Access Foundation (ncpaf.com),
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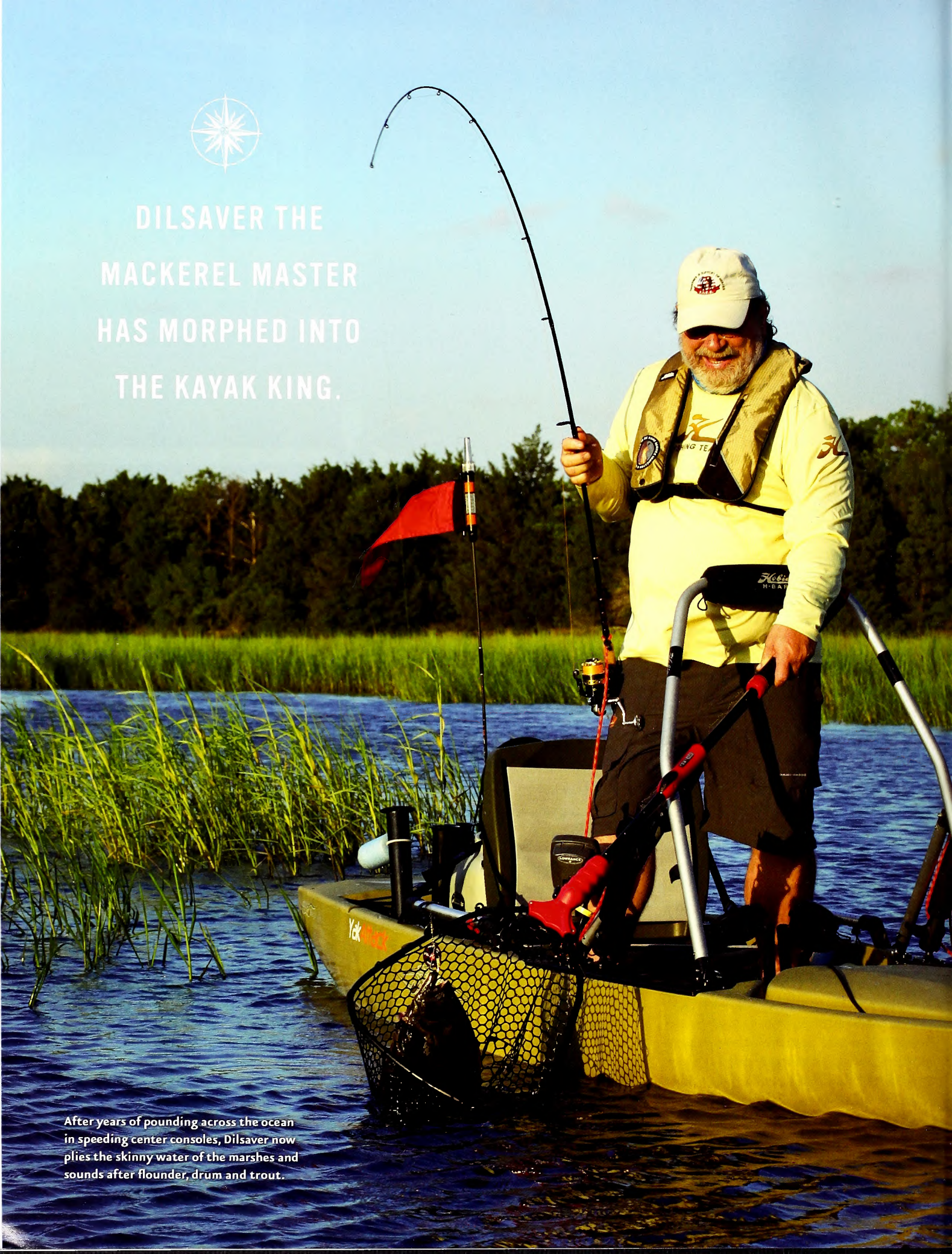


DILSAVER THE MACKEREL MASTER HAS MORPHED INTO THE KAYAK KING.

After years of pounding across the ocean in speeding center consoles, Dilsaver now plies the skinny water of the marshes and sounds after flounder, drum and trout.

Dilsaver didn't tell me or the crowd, but he donates his time and travel expenses for these in-store seminars. George Blalock, associate manager of the exchange, mentioned it.

"It's special to us," he said. "We don't really promote that he donated his time, but it's special to us. It's special to us when anybody helps us help these guys when they're not out in the field."

From 2009 to 2011, Dilsaver ran the Wounded Warriors Fishing Club and made a weekly two-hour ride to take men from the Wounded Warrior Battalion-East on local fishing excursions.

"I appreciate, especially, an all-volunteer military," he said at the exchange food court in between classes. "These guys lay their lives on the line so we can enjoy our way of life. If I can take these guys fishing, it's a small price to pay."

Dilsaver said that the fishing and driving were therapeutic for him as well—times of peace and reflection among the travails of being a freelance outdoorsman, parsing together a living from various projects. The program also produced friendships that have lasted to this day, and he still hears from some of the Marines and even fishes with a few.

REMINISCING

Riding around Southport and Oak Island with Jerry, one gets an informal history lesson. As Dilsaver wheeled his Chevy Avalanche around, he talked of friends past and present. A Sandhills boat dealer owns that beach house. A Triad restaurateur owns this one. A carpet manufacturer owns the one over there. He's proud that Oak Island roads that run to the beach are deeded up to the high-tide line, giving much public access and parking. He wrangled a pass from the watchman at Fort Caswell and drove around that remarkable piece of property.

On to Southport for lunch, he drove about and showed how the roads were designed around the massive oak trees. He drove to Taylor Field, where high school and Little League teams used to play. He pointed out where scenes of the movie "I Know What You Did Last Summer" and the TV series "Dawson's Creek" were filmed.

"We'd ride bicycles with shotguns strapped to the handlebars down that road to hunt for squirrels," he said, shaking his head at the memory. "We'd bring .22s or shotguns to school and give them to the assistant principal to hold for us, then go hunting after school."

COMPETING

At a local Mexican restaurant, Dilsaver talked about competing in king mackerel tournaments from 1987 to 2008 and winning the Southern Kingfish Association's national championship in 2001 in the Class of 23 and Under, the smaller-boat division. Their winning king mackerel was actually bigger than that of the big-boat winner. It was angling icing on an outdoors cake decades in the making.

"We didn't win a bunch," he said with a laugh, "but we placed in the top five a lot. We were the Mark Martins of king fishing."

That ended in Fort Pierce, Fla., when Jerry and his crew landed two kings totaling 74 pounds to win by 8 pounds.

"It was neat," said Dilsaver, reminiscing about the homecoming. "The [congratulatory] signs started right out here on [highways] 211 and 133 and went all the way to the house, 10 or 11 miles scattered out along. There were family and close friends at the house. We didn't have champagne, but there were some beers."

Dilsaver, by his own admission, has a reputation for being stern when captaining a boat and pretty much set in his ways of doing things. Maybe not Capt. Bligh stern, but tough at times. Bob Black of Oak Island crewed with Dilsaver for years and was on the winning team in Florida.

"When it comes to competition, he worked hard," said Black. "He could be snippy on a boat, no doubt. He could be a pain in the ass sometimes, but it was good fishing. He had a way of doing things, smart. Our work didn't start in the morning when the flag dropped. I went to Florida four days before the tournament and then did several hundred miles going to tackle shops, commercial fishermen and piers to get information. That was quite a time—our 15 minutes of fame. He loves the outdoors, whether it's catching a marlin or sitting in a duck blind at Lake Mattamuskeet in 0-degree weather."

Dilsaver quit fishing king tournaments regularly in 2007, the same year he was elected into the SKA Hall of Fame (on the "first ballot," he joked).

A combination of burnout, physical pounding, trying to keep a crew and finances together for 26 to 28 tournaments across the Southeast took a toll.

"I was so damn particular, I did everything myself," he said. "It was a full-time job. But I made some great friends and it was a great time, and I do not regret it. I started backing out when it was no longer prudent. I was fortunate to have had some very good people on my crews."

TODAY

Dilsaver the mackerel master has morphed into the kayak king. He's traded in dual outboards for paddles and is on the Hobie Cat pro staff. He does a number of kayak-fishing seminars and leads 'yak fishermen on salt marsh and sound trips. His Hobie Cat Pro Angler is just as tricked out as a king mackerel boat, with a GPS, fish finders, baitwells, rod holders and self-propulsion from pedals. Everything on his kayaks is either tied on or equipped with flotation. "It's not 'if' you're going to tip over, it's 'when,'" he said.

He's still writing for several newspapers and magazines, still fishes the occasional king tournament and inshore redfish event, and is still recognized wherever he goes by the scores of anglers who "know" him through his various endeavors, mostly seminars and classes.

"I probably could have been a good teacher if I could have put up with kids in a classroom," he said as he drove back to his home. "When you see that light come on in a person's head, it's rewarding. Most rewarding is when 10 years after you get an email or phone call to thank you for something you've forgotten about. It's all about passing it on."

Kind of like the Old Man and the Boy.

Mike Zlotnicki is the associate editor of Wildlife in North Carolina. *He may be reached at 919-707-0175 or mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org.*

My Kind of SPORT

written by Michael Reno Harrell · illustrated by Chris Armstrong

Everyone in our part of the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina called him Old Man Stover Mason. I remember as a 6-year-old kid thinking that was his real, honest-to-God given name and wondering what it must have been like being called that as a boy. Stover loved two things more than anything else in this world, besides his family. He lived for really strong, really hot black coffee boiled in his old Army canteen over a mountaintop campfire, and Walker hounds. And the thing that brought those two together was fox hunting.

Now, fox hunting in that part of the world is pretty much a thing of the past. If you were to turn loose a pack of baying dogs in those McMansion-covered mountains nowadays, the phone lines over at the Buncombe County sheriff's office would light up like the fireworks display at the Fourth of July Red, White and Bluegrass Festival down in Morganton. And instead of blowing on the end of your old cow-horn bugle to get your dogs back, you'd blow your retirement paying fines for everything from disturbing the peace to creating a nuisance to malice toward non-indigenous personage. And you'd most likely have to deal with the ASPCA for the neurosis suffered by your poor, mistreated pups because they were asked to work nights.

Mix dogs, lies and coffee for a traditional Appalachian fox hunt. The fox is optional.

The particular type of fox hunting I'm referring to doesn't involve fine horses, silver tea services or velvet-covered helmets. And it's the only type of hunting, short of a snipe hunt, that I know of that requires neither weapons nor ammunition.

All that was required to initiate an Appalachian fox hunt was to drive a truckload of dogs (both yours and an accompanying hunting partner's) as far up a mountain as was possible, turn those dogs loose, and then carry a box of matches, a metal canteen full of leftover breakfast coffee and a blanket to the top of the mountain. There a fire was lit and a green stick was cut, upon which the canteen was hung by its chain over the fire, and the blanket was unrolled, upon which the fox hunter reclined.

I will admit that some fellows carried a jar of Wilkes County snakebite remedy in case the timber rattler population got cocky. I quizzed Stover on the cure for rattlesnake attack once, and he allowed that he had self-medicated against that event so much in his past that he figured he was immune. I told him that perhaps I should begin a regimen of inoculation myself, and he conjectured that we'd probably both be better off if I was to just die of snakebite rather than for either of us to have to explain to my mom why I came in smelling like rattler vaccine.

Believe it or not, the objective of the fox hunt didn't even involve catching the prey. Nope, the objective was to lie about the fire with your buddies and lie about things. The falsities offered up might center around the sport in which you were engaged at the time, or they could well delve into politics (usually local) or the merits of a favorite brand of farming equipment, or they could simply test just how far one could stretch the truth before it snapped, at which Stover was a master.

That's all it took to participate in Appalachian fox hunting, more often referred to as a fox race, which is perhaps a more apt description of this traditional method. The stated purpose of the whole procedure, however, was for the dogs to strike a scent (preferably the scent of a fox), at which point a chase ensued.

The fox seemed to enjoy the sport as much as any of the other participants, in that he seemed to delight in leading the dogs on what most would describe as a merry chase. This could last for as little as 10 minutes or as long as all night, the end being determined by the fox. After cavorting over fences, across bodies of water, through blackberry thickets and down rock-strewn game trails, the pursued member of the race would simply duck into a convenient hole in the ground, leaving the puzzled dogs wondering what had happened.

Old Stover was known as the finest trader of horseflesh, shotguns, Rototillers and pocketknives in that end of the state, but when it came to the swapping of hunting dogs, he would have to be ranked as a mark. As I mentioned, Stover loved Walkers, and if he thought he detected even a hint of that noble breed in some flea-bitten, broke-down, toothless specimen of canine debauchery, he'd trade the tires off his old International stake bed for the mutt.

The two of us were over in Asheville one Saturday morning, engaged in a bout of what Stover referred to as "loafering," when he allowed as how we needed to make a stop down on the banks of the French Broad to see a fellow. "Now, Boy, it might not be the best idea to tell your mama just where all we've been today." This was followed by a knowing wink, which I answered with an unknowing but eager-to-find-out-more wink of my own.

It seems there was a crony of Stover's who happened to run a bootlegging establishment there on the river. And this old boy had found that it was to his advantage to trade quart Mason jars filled with snakebite medicine for just about anything of value, seeing as how the paper mill was on strike and feeder calves weren't bringing squat, meaning cash was tight. Trade goods included not only electric drills and outboard Evinrudes, but also hunting dogs of most any description. Now, a fellow most likely wouldn't bring in his best pointer or coonhound to trade off for a Saturday night's fun and a Sunday morning's pain, so the reader can likely deduce the quality of the animals that Stover's shine-selling compadre kept on hand. We came home that evening with what had to have been the world's oldest cocker spaniel lounging on that worn-out vinyl seat between

us. Stover was grinning like he'd just traded for a Westminster champion. There was likely more fox in that spaniel than fox dog.

Our buddy, Sam Burton, on the other hand, didn't dabble in hardware or horseflesh, but he could and would hoodoo a buddy out of a good Walker in a Haywood County minute. And if it could be proven that the animal in question had about one-eighth Texas July hound in its veins, pictures of dead presidents might well get involved.

More often than not, it was Sam who rode shotgun with Stover and me up Old Piney on one of our Saturday evening fox-finding forays. He and Stover had listened to many a race, and I felt it a great honor to be included in this grown-ups' game of fox and hound.

Like my heroes, I was determined to learn the art of dog trading, but seeing as how the pastor up at Snow Hill Church was right adamant about lying being a black sin (the worst kind), I was a bit skittish about getting too deeply involved in that particular vein of the sport. Then Stover straightened me out one night by advising, "Why, Boy, it ain't a sin if dogs are involved. Well, that is, dogs or any of several other specific items." It's amazing what one can learn from one's elders.

Any fox hunter worth his saltines can sit and listen to Old Wiley lead a pack of hunting dogs around a mountain and give an accurate play-by-play of the action taking place in those hollows below. "That's my little yellow gyp leading the pack through that laurel thicket down there above Tom Wilson's place." Which most likely would be answered with something like, "Oh, she'll give out when that fox swims the pack across that deep hole in Pole Creek. Then see if my big red with the bent tail don't take over. That dog swims like a rainbow trout."

Practitioners of the sport referred to the barking of the hounds on the chase as "music." Late one Saturday night, the three of us were sitting around a dying fire and Sam's fine pack was still hot, trailing a particularly elusive red fox. (Sam claimed he could tell the breed of a fox just by the way the dogs sounded, and I still believe he could.) Stover's mix of misfits had long since given up the chase and were snoozing around him on that old moth-eaten Army blanket of his. Sam sat up and strained an ear toward the action below and said to me, "Boy, how do you like that music?" It was my job to keep the fire stoked, which was all that was keeping me from crawling in with Stover and his bed buddies. I dragged the back of a soot-smudged hand across my sleepy eyes and answered, "Sam, I can't hear the music for your dogs barking."

Sam laughed, then walked over to where Stover and his pack of snoring pooches lay and said above the old fellow's snoring, "Watch this. Any time we stop in at the Hot Shot Café over in town, our old pal there always complains that their coffee is cold as an old maid's . . . well, er, that their coffee ain't never hot enough to suit him." With that, he grabbed hold of the dogwood stick that had Stover's canteen hanging about 2 feet above the glowing embers and set the metal vessel right down among those red-hot coals. In a matter of seconds, a spout of steam was rolling from the neck of that canteen. Sam reached over and got the cup that fit onto the butt of Stover's makeshift coffee pot and tipped out a boiling dose of the black liquid.

He kicked the sole of Stover's old boot and announced: "Time to call them in. Here, drink up, and we'll head down the mountain."

Stover slowly propped himself up on a bony forearm, shook off his nap, reached for the cup and sloshed down a big mouthful.

Sam elbowed me and said to the old hunter, "Now, how's that for hot enough?" Stover took another big gulp, rolled over and scratched his back against a stump and allowed that the brew was "jest right."

My kind of sport.

Michael Reno Harrell of Morganton is an award-winning songwriter as well as a veteran storyteller and entertainer. This is his first story for Wildlife in North Carolina.

The Promise

written by Robert W. Kimsey

I don't remember all their names, those old men who lived through the week so they could hear a fox hounds cry on Saturday night. Those characters that would steal my chicken dinner and eat my tomatoes while I was hunting for water, yet would make sure if there was just one blanket I was covered with it against the chill. I don't remember all their faces, smiling as their dog took the lead or shining in the firelight as they raised horns to blow the dogs in, while the morning fog formed around us. I don't remember it all, but I do remember why they let me come with them on Indian summer nights. I gave them my promise to tell the stories after they were gone.

Poet and Appalachian fly-fisherman Robert W. Kimsey is the author of "Air Swimmer," which is available from FutureCycle Press at futurecycle.org.

A BEAR HUNT *at Oakland*

Written by Dr. Richard Rankin
Photographed by Derrick Hamrick

The terrain is difficult and the quarry challenging, but the payoff can be huge. Literally.

The December morning is blue-sky clear and cold enough to freeze the water in roadside ditches on Whitehall Road in Bladen County. The pinewoods create some open expanses, but tangled, jungle-like Carolina bays are densely scattered across the landscape. Kenny Soles, Rick Neisler and a half-dozen other bear hunters from Oakland Plantation are on Jeff Etheridge's property looking for bear tracks. The Etheridge property adjoins Neisler family game lands just south of N.C. 87, about 5 miles from Oakland Plantation near Carvers Creek, close to the Cape Fear River at the Elwell Ferry crossing. Oakland is headquarters for the Neislers' 9,000-acre private hunting preserve and for Oakland Plantation Turf Farm, a commercial turf grass farm. Using his pickup truck the evening before, Soles dragged the dirt roads smooth so that fresh bear tracks would be visible this morning.

Oakland, long known for its premier deer hunting, has added bear hunting to its sporting repertoire since the mid-1980s. These days, black bears are abundant at Oakland, as they are throughout much of southeastern North Carolina. With more than 30 years of black bear hunting in the area, Soles, Oakland's wildlife manager, has ridden the crest of the expanding black bear population and has emerged as one of the most celebrated bear hunters in his home territory. Today his friends, Steve and Josh Shelton, veteran bear hunters from the North Carolina mountains, are hoping to lead their pack of bear hounds in pursuit of another bruin.

Bear hunting is a group sport. The Oakland hunting party includes Neisler, president of Oakland Plantation Turf Farm; Soles; the Sheltons; John Williams, Oakland Turf supervisor; Curtis Coleman from Carvers Creek; and Brian Etheridge, son of the property owner.

TODD PUSSER

Not long after daylight, Soles spots a fresh track. Steve Shelton takes his trail dog, Crook, on a leash to the paw print. As Crook barks with excitement at the scent, Shelton holds the straining hound's leash as they follow the bear trail down the sandy road and turn right onto a grassy road. When the bear hound reaches a gate at road's end, Shelton releases him, and the dog bellows as he tracks the bear into Rosendale Bay. As usual, the bear has fled into one of the meanest, thickest Carolina bays around these parts. The hunters can tell from the dog's noises when it jumps the bear.

As the trail dog howls its approval, Shelton turns loose two more dogs that scramble toward the booming sound of the trail dog deep in the bay. Suddenly, the bear reverses and runs back across the Whitehall Road, chased by the three dogs. Neisler spots the bear as it strides across the dirt road and determines that it is medium size—big enough to hunt. At this critical moment, Shelton decides to release the rest of the pack, and six more dogs join the fray as the bear

A battle-scarred bear hound awaits a morning hunt from a pickup truck dog box.

retreats into Rosendale Bay. For the next three hours, the bear and the pack move back and forth in a 50-acre block of the bay. All the while, the bear repeats the same fight-and-flight routine countless times as it walks away from the pack, only to turn back and attack the dogs, before again running away.

The designated shooter, bear-hunting newcomer Brian Etheridge, and veteran Josh Shelton enter the bay about 10:30 a.m. and slowly work their way through the tangle toward the barking hounds. As Soles notes, bear hunters are often tested to the limits of their physical endurance in the nearly impenetrable Carolina bays. "Most of it is crawling on hand and knees, or on your belly, wriggling like a snake through the bushes." This bear moves along a ditch in the bay's interior, fighting the dogs all the way. The quarry is so close that hunters see the bushes shaking, but the thick vegetation blocks a clear view. Etheridge and Shelton make easier progress when they crawl into a path bulldozed earlier by the bear as it rumbled through the dense underbrush. At last, the bear and dogs double back toward the hunters and move into plain sight. Shelton, a seasoned hunter, gives Etheridge the command to shoot. At 11 a.m., Etheridge fires a single soft-point bullet from his .30-06 rifle and kills the bear.

After the bear is down, the work begins. According to Soles, the bigger the bear, the meaner the place where it makes its last stand. Soles starts to cut, Williams widens, and Neisler finishes a direct path from the road to the bear. When the path is cleared, the hunting party cinches a rope to the carcass and begins to haul it out. They drag until they need to rest. Then they drag some more until they need to rest. More of the same. Over and over. At last they reach the road, the waiting trucks and others in their triumphant hunting party. The bear is brought back to Oakland and weighs in at 245 pounds. The delicious meat will feed guest deer hunters at Oakland next season. Etheridge takes the hide for a rug. An upper premolar is extracted for the state wildlife biologist. This will be the last bear hunt at Oakland this season.

The resurgence of the black bear population in southeastern North Carolina seemed unlikely when Bladen County resident and University of Georgia graduate student Joe Hamilton researched bear ecology in his home county from 1974 to 1976. Since the 1950s, liberal hunting season,the continuing loss of bear habitat to agricultural fields and timber plantations resulted in a steady decline. In 1976, southeastern hunters harvested only 31 bears in Pender, Bladen, Columbus and Brunswick counties. They took none in Sampson or New Hanover. Soles said that a skilled woodsman could search all day and find no sign of bears. Now they are common. In 2011, the bear harvest in the same five counties reached 227. A few bears are even taken each year even in small but populous New Hanover.

Despite the steady decline of prime habitat, bear populations have rebounded for several reasons. Good wildlife management has been critical. As early as the 1950s, hunting laws were changed to prohibit taking a female bear with cubs and bears under 50 pounds. Since then, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) has limited the length of the bear season, mandated the registration of all harvested bears and stopped the use of bait in bear hunting. In 1971, the NCWRC created the "designated" black bear sanctuary program to provide safe, stable core areas for breeding populations to expand into the surrounding countryside. In Brunswick County, the NCWRC and the Federal Paperboard Co. were partners in creating the Green Swamp black bear sanctuary program. Even today, some of the largest coastal bears are killed on lands adjacent to bear sanctuaries. Additionally, black bears have proved much more adaptable in switching from traditional forest to agricultural food sources.

Soles began hunting when the bear population was just beginning to expand. In 1980, he belonged to a deer-hunting club in the Green Swamp off N.C. 211 in Brunswick County, owning a pack of 30 deer dogs. He killed his first bear there in 1980 when a hunter from Hendersonville came down to the deer club and invited Soles along. The bear they killed that day would be one of only four taken in Brunswick County that season.

Despite the steady decline of prime habitat, bear populations have rebounded for several reasons. Good wildlife management has been critical.

The following season, R.C. James, a well-known bear hunter from Elizabethton, Tenn., was hunting in the Green Swamp when his dogs chased a bear onto Soles' hunt club land. James asked Soles for permission to pursue the bear and invited him to join the hunt. The next day, James invited Soles to hunt with him again, and Soles brought his new girlfriend and future wife, Pat, to accompany them—it was their first date. Pat was right next to the trunk when the treed bear was shot, and bear hunting was immediately in her blood, too. She and Soles decided right then that they were going to raise a pack of bear hounds. Besides the two bears taken on the hunts with James, only three more would be killed in Brunswick County the whole season.

Over the next four years, Kenny and Pat hunted with James in Canada, Maine, and Hyde County and southeastern North Carolina. He and Pat were also raising a fine pack of bear dogs that were coming into their

(Clockwise) Oakland Plantation is situated on a bluff overlooking the Cape Fear River. When not actively trailing a bear, hounds are leashed. A bear hound at the moment of release splashes through low land. Trophies of past hunts adorn the walls of the plantation house. Radio telemetry helps hunters find hounds.

Oakland Plantation

Tethered hounds bay at a treed bear. At the end of the hunt a harvested bear is brought out for processing and hounds are loaded into the dog boxes.

own. But disaster struck in a 1984 Green Swamp hunt when a single bear killed his six best dogs. The Soleses were devastated but decided to start over and build another pack. The new pack came back better and stronger. Belle, Kenny's new trail dog, was one of the finest bear dogs around. He believes that the key to developing a great pack of dogs is for the master to build a personal relationship with all of them, spending quality time with each dog every day. The master becomes the leader of the pack. The dogs hunt fearlessly in part because they know their master will rescue them from bear attacks.

Bear hunting can be dangerous. On many occasions, Soles kicked bears attacking his dogs. Once while hunting in the Green Swamp, he went in on a treed bear, only to see another bear over 300 pounds standing close by on the side of a tree. When part of the pack went after the second bruin, the bear bent down, grabbed Belle and began mauling her. Soles, pistol in hand, could not shoot for fear of killing his prize dog, so he ran in and began furiously kicking the bear. The bear rose up, chomped down on Soles' upper thigh, and flipped him upside down while holding him in his mouth. Soles, pistol still in hand, stuck his gun under the bear's chin and shot it dead. Only then did the bear drop him. Soles came away from the close encounter with two puncture wounds on one side of his leg and the other side badly bruised. Belle survived relatively unharmed.

By 1986, Soles was establishing his reputation as one of the top bear hunters in southeastern North Carolina. Before 1980, hunters from the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains dominated Southeastern bear hunting. Soles said that Roy Acuff and other country music stars came to Lake Waccamaw to hunt bears in the Green Swamp in the 1950s and '60s. Soles recalls only two serious local bear hunters in the southeastern part of the state before him. Erwin Peterson from Parkersburg hunted in Bladen and Brunswick counties, and Sap Sanderson in the Holly Shelter Swamp in Pender and Sampson counties. Peterson and Sanderson began hunting as far back as the 1940s during an era when bears were scarce. Soles knew and admired both men and hunted with these legends toward the end of their careers.

Throughout the late 1980s and until 1993, Soles hunted every day of every bear season, mostly in southeastern North Carolina but never as a paid guide. In the mid-1980s, he began hunting with Neisler and other Oakland associates, first in the Green Swamp and then on Neisler land. Before then, bears had rarely been seen on Neisler land, and only one bear had ever been killed at Oakland. But all this was about to change. As a growing bear population in Bladen County expanded onto the Neisler game lands. In 1977, 9 bears were harvested in all of Bladen County. A decade later the number rose to 28.

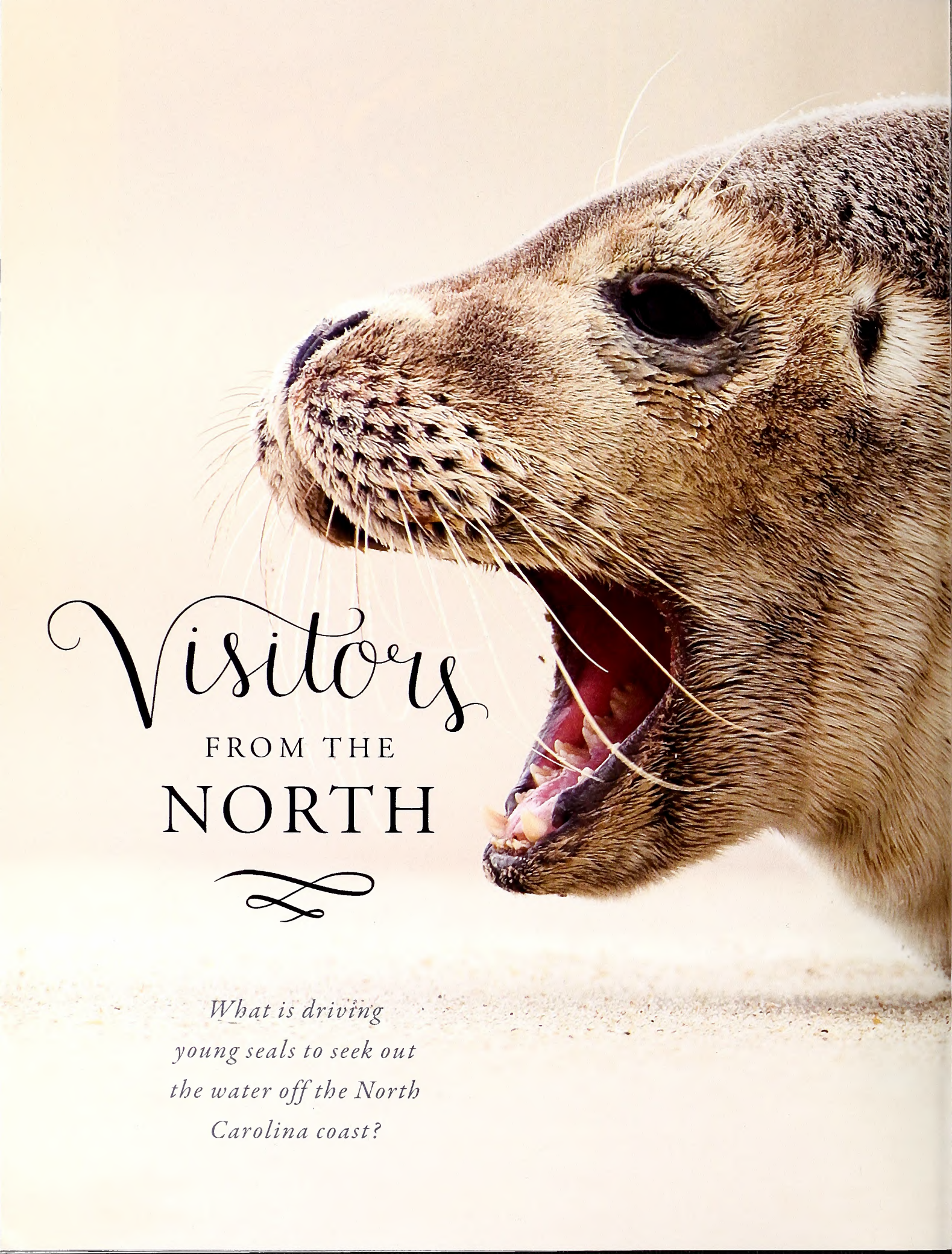
In 1993, Soles suffered a massive heart attack while bear hunting and temporarily gave up the sport on doctor's orders. Unable to hunt while convalescing, a broken-hearted Soles gave away his dogs to a mountain bear hunter so they could hunt regularly. After regaining his strength and unwilling to abandon the sport, Soles started bear hunting exclusively on Neisler game land with Rick Neisler, Gerald Putnam (Neisler's brother-in-law) and Oakland Turf's Steve Guyton, always using other people's dogs. Since then, there have been more than 50 bear hunts on Neisler property, mainly on the Whitehall Road. The average number of bears harvested annually in Bladen in the 1990s grew to almost 40.

In 2002, Soles' relationship with Oakland Plantation became official as he assumed the position of wildlife manager. Today, bear sightings are common. Trail cameras, set up at corn piles to take pictures of game at night, capture almost as many photos of bears as deer, and Soles said Neisler game lands are "infested with bear." In the most recent season, 88 bears were harvested in Bladen County. With three or four bears killed each year on Neisler game lands, Oakland hunts account for roughly 5 percent of the total Bladen bear harvest each year.

The future for black bear hunting at Oakland and throughout southeastern North Carolina has not looked brighter for more than a century. Bear hunting is growing in popularity as a big-game sport in the Lower Cape Fear region. For Rick Neisler, steward of family game lands for more than 30 years, black bear hunting offers an exciting sport on one of the state's greatest private hunting preserves. For Soles, whose bear-hunting career has traced the rebounding bear population, some of the best bear hunting in the world is right in his own backyard. Soles and Neisler recently captured a picture of a black bear near the Whitehall Road that weighs more than 700 pounds. They know it is out there waiting for them.

By the way, Soles recently purchased four good bear dogs and is building a new pack.

Dr. Richard Rankin is the headmaster of Gaston Day School in Gastonia. This is his first story for Wildlife in North Carolina.



Visitors FROM THE NORTH

What is driving young seals to seek out the water off the North Carolina coast?

Written and Photographed by

Jared Lloyd

FOR THREE DAYS, THE WIND HAD BLOWN hard out of the northeast. Wave heights had maxed out at 15 feet or so, and temperatures had dropped into the low 30s, with God knows what as the wind chill factor. As I drove along the foreshore next to the ocean, flotsam washing in with the storm presented a continuous obstacle.

Winds were still coming onshore at around 20 mph, and the sand took on the feel of drifting snow. Up ahead I could make out two figures on the beach huddled close for warmth. With so much moisture being driven in off the ocean during these sorts of blows, the cold seems to cut right through your body, chilling you to the bone.

Between my truck and the half-frozen couple lay a creature on the beach not typically associated with the South. Undulating across the sand, the animal was flopping its way up from the water's edge. Roughly 3 feet long, its body curled into a telltale "banana" pose when it stopped, a harbor seal had hauled itself out of the tumultuous winter seas and onto the beach in Kill Devil Hills.

Now if this were Massachusetts, no one would think twice about a harbor seal pup on the beach. But this is North Carolina, where seals were almost unheard of just a decade ago. Over the last 10 years, however, seal sightings have increased, with the 2009–2010 season bringing in at least three unique sightings a week. From around Christmas until April, there were more than 60 seal sightings from Corolla to Ocracoke. All of that activity has sent the Marine Mammal Stranding Network into overdrive and left some pinniped researchers scrambling to keep up.

The seals that have been wintering along the Outer Banks these past few years are primarily first- and second-year pups. That fact alone sends up a few red flags and raises one of the many questions I had for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Karen Clark, who heads the Marine Mammal Stranding Network (MMSN) on the wispy strand of barrier islands. Because Karen was busy with a dolphin stranding elsewhere on the beach, she had asked me to check out this seal sighting and, if possible, bring her back some images.

As I climbed out of my truck to get my camera gear together, the couple I had seen while driving up the beach began walking over. They were MMSN volunteers who had come out to educate any beachgoers who happened along about the seal and to help keep the animal safe from human harassment while it was resting.

(Top) Harbor seal sightings, such as this pup on the Outer Banks, have gone from almost none to more than 60 a year in about a decade. It could be the beginning of a new migration pattern. An adult harp seal is shown at the bottom.

The thing about juveniles of pretty much any species of mammal is that they tend to be, well, cute. With short faces, heart-shaped noses, big whiskers and large, searching eyes that seem to pierce right through you, seal pups make people all over the world feel warm and fuzzy. There is something striking about them, something familiar and human. Kneeling down to get on the same level as the seal, I could see its large, ink-black eyes following me. From the moment I had arrived, it had not taken its gaze off me, like an inquisitive child. Add that seal pups look very much like big puppies—hence the name "pup"—and you have a recipe for disaster when people happen upon them on the beach.

When people find seal pups, they want to interact with them. Everybody wants to pet them. Children want to name them. Fishermen try to feed them. I even saw one instance in which a family had taken a shovel and built a 4-foot wall of sand around a seal to block the wind for it, leaving a small opening so the seal could get in and out. The well-intentioned family signed their names in the sand next to the wall—quite proud of their "good deed." Others tell stories of people who have put blankets on seals and about how a man in Connecticut tried to take a seal pup home with him, like a stray kitten.

The problem with this sort of interaction is multifaceted, and harmful effects can result for both seals and people. For starters, the seals really are on the beach to rest. It's a tough world out there in the winter ocean off the Outer Banks. There is a reason the area is known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic. The seals' energy supplies are wasted and they are hundreds of miles from their natal grounds, so they are hauling out to rest in a desperate attempt to survive. Approaching a seal pup on the beach only stresses the animal further and will often force it back into the ocean—an act that can be a death sentence, as attested to by the numbers of dead seal pups that wash up on the Outer Banks each winter.

When I was able to meet up with Clark, I asked her about human interaction and the role of the MMSN. As it turns out, keeping people away from the seals has become one of the largest tasks of the network on the Outer Banks. An army of volunteers must be maintained from Corolla to Ocracoke to respond to sightings. People and pets are the primary threats to seals on the beach, she told me.

But why were we seeing the pups to begin with? Adults would seem to be more adept at such a long journey from their summer feeding grounds. North Carolina had rarely seen a mature seal until the past couple of years.

Long-distance travel, research has shown, is often a matter of pushing and pulling. For animals on such energy-depleting expeditions, environmental factors usually push them out of where they are and pull them to where they end up. It is not clear why pups are beginning

THERE IS SOMETHING STRIKING ABOUT THEM, SOMETHING *familiar* AND *human*.

to frequent the Outer Banks, but it probably has something to do with competition. Adult seals have an edge when it comes to hunting, so in areas with a high population density, the juveniles wander farther from their summer grounds when pickings get slim in the colder months.

Amy Ferland, president of the Southeastern New England Marine Educators and a longtime harbor seal researcher, says the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 is responsible for all of this. Once it became illegal to hunt and kill seals in the United States, the animals began to rebound in numbers that might well be more than 100,000 in the New England area. As the population has grown, the few areas where seals could still be found before 1972 have become heavily populated, so suitable habitat is hard to come by.

In 1981 aerial counts began along the coast of Maine, which is considered the primary breeding grounds of these seals. In the first year, the study counted about 10,000 seals. By 2001, when the United States' last comprehensive aerial survey was completed, the number had increased nearly tenfold to about 100,000. The survey was conducted only along the Maine coast and did not include other New England or Canadian breeding sites. With that sort of increase in just 20 years, we can only guess what the numbers might look like today.

Harbor seals were exterminated throughout most of New England in the early 1900s. Labeled as pests, seals experienced a wholesale slaughter in the United States, as they were deemed to be competition for commercially valuable fish. Numbers remained dangerously low for the entire western Atlantic population until the seals became protected in 1972. Since then, the numbers have grown rapidly, and along the coast of North Carolina, we are most likely beginning to experience the historical patterns of these marine mammals once again.

As pupping areas have become overcrowded up North, seals have begun to search for new areas to colonize, such as Long Island Sound, which has historically harbored large numbers of seals year round. Long Island Sound is roughly 300 miles north of the Outer Banks. According to guidebooks and texts on seals, 300 miles happens to be the agreed-upon range that seals are known to travel. That might account for the sudden increase in seals as far south as North Carolina—or maybe not.

AFTER THE CROWDS OF SUMMER HAVE GONE, *Seals* ARE THE VISITORS THAT MANY OF US HAVE COME TO ANTICIPATE.

Putting a cap on seal migration at 300 miles leaves much to be explained. Man's understanding of migration in birds is still considered by many biologists to be in its infancy. When it comes to marine species, data are practically nonexistent. So when researchers got around to affixing tracking devices to seals and numbers started rolling in, the results blew the top off of what little we thought we knew about the migratory habits of these animals. Guidebooks can't keep up.

Case in point: Hastings the Seal. Hastings, a harbor seal pup, was taken to the National Aquarium in Baltimore for rehabilitation and was later released back into the Atlantic on May 13, 2010. Before his big bon voyage, he was outfitted with a tracking device so researchers could get a glimpse of his movements. Hastings, of course, did what we would expect any good seal pup to do at that time of year, which was to head north to the colder and more productive waters of the Gulf of Maine. Instead of making a beeline up the coast, Hastings decided to take a few detours, logging 1,175 miles before making it up to Maine, where the satellite lost his signal. That was nearly four times the distance expected of a seal pup.

The year before, another seal, this one nicknamed Hamilton, had also been outfitted with a tracking device by the National Aquarium. Hamilton had originally been picked up on a beach in Bermuda. Once released in Delaware, he kept to his plans for some sun and fun by heading to Daytona Beach, Fla., which he reached in 16 days. After spending a few days in Daytona, he decided to head back north, traveling up from Florida to the Gulf of Maine in just a couple of weeks. That sort of stuff was not really supposed to be happening.

Even if seals are beginning to breed in Long Island Sound, seals are more than capable of leaving the common breeding areas of New England and making their way down to North Carolina and points beyond for the winter.

Ferland thinks we are seeing a distinct pattern of migration. Although some may argue that this behavior does not constitute true migration, in some species that are considered migratory, some individuals leave, while others do not. Furthermore, when animals migrate, they are not always going to the same place, or even in the same direction. Therefore, we may very well be seeing a migratory pattern, which Ferland says is one of the unique traits of the western Atlantic harbor seals.

One thing that is agreed upon when it comes to migration is that resources are the driving force. Be it food or sex, these are two of the most powerful and demanding of needs at work in the world. What else could be so pressing as to cause an individual to undergo such a costly and statistically deadly undertaking?

In the summer of 2000, the Marine Environmental Research Institute conducted a study of the dietary habits of harbor seals. The study found that 75 percent of harbor seals' diets in the western Atlantic was composed of whiting, red hake, Atlantic herring and redfish. Species such as winter flounder also found their way into the bellies of these seals with regularity. Although some might say that seals are not migratory, it is accepted that these species of fish make annual migrations from the Gulf of Maine to North Carolina. If migration is all about food, and the primary sources of seals' summer foods migrate to North Carolina, it's possible that seals are simply following their food.

Harbor seals are the most common seal coming ashore in North Carolina today, but they are not the only species. The Outer Banks is beginning to see even the rare and exotic species that are normally found on the pack ice of the frozen North, such as harp seals and hooded seals. Studies have shown that ice-loving seals have survival rates that are inextricable from the quality of that year's pack ice. Everything is timed to coincide with the spring break-up of ice: mating season, gestation length, pupping months and how long it takes a harp seal to wean from its mother.

With three decades of significant warming in the Arctic and the subsequent effect on the pack ice and its spring break-up, researchers are watching entire age classes of seals perish. Some of these seals are beginning to adapt by transitioning to Greenland, where there is more stable pack ice than in the Gulf of St. Lawrence off Canada. Others are left wandering to try to find suitable pupping and feeding grounds elsewhere. In 2011, three adult harp seals were reported in the same day on the Outer Banks. All three were at different locations, and one had been found by the author, hauled out on a dock in the Currituck Sound.

Since the seals started showing up, pups have always been the norm, with only a handful of adults appearing from time to time. That was, until I got a phone call telling me that fishermen were reporting some seals on one of the dredge-spoil islands at Oregon Inlet. Jurisdiction over that area is held among several agencies, including Cape Hatteras National Seashore and the Wildlife Resources Commission. At the time, no one had been able to get out to the island to investigate the reports. So, with it being February and the water temps in the low 40s, I did what I thought would be most logical: I launched my sea kayak head-first into the tidal currents of one of the most dangerous inlets in the world, hoping to spot a few seals.

Nearing the island, I pulled out my binoculars to glass the sandy shoreline. Just as I had expected—nothing but a bunch of washed-up logs and debris from the recent nor'easter. Or at least that's what

The gray seal, top, is another recent visitor to our coast. A harbor seal is shown in the bottom picture. Harbor seals are the most common visitors to our waters.

I thought, until one of those logs turned around and slid into the water. Deciding that was not the typical behavior of a log, I pulled my kayak in closer to the island for a better look.

My brain was not prepared to see what I was looking at. Like the story of the Arawak Indians not seeing Columbus' ships for several days although they looked right at them, nothing on this scale had ever been recorded in North Carolina. Instead of logs, I counted 37 mature adult seals on the edge of the island, sunning themselves. In the waters around me, another four popped their heads up in what is called bottling, to get a better look at me. A quick survey of the rest of the area also confirmed several more along the edge of another island. I was convinced I'd gone through some sort of wrinkle in the universe and was now off the coast of Maine.

Within a couple of hundred feet of the island, the seals bolted into the water at the site of my kayak. This is normal seal behavior and what we expect from adults. This is also what we see from many of the pups on the beach, especially those on the cape in the National Seashore and the inlet spits. Seals that need volunteers to help keep people from disturbing them need some serious rest and relaxation.

For whatever reasons, each winter these odd yet fascinating little pinnipeds haul themselves onto the beaches of the Outer Banks, and each year, we are finding more and more. The uniqueness of the North Carolina coast, with its barrier islands, and the collision of the Gulf Stream with the Labrador Current along the Outer Banks cannot be overstated. The sight of a seal resting just above the foreshore of the beach only drives home this point. Even locals are taken back when they hear of seals. When word goes out that a seal is on the beach, people leave work to go out and see these creatures of the Northern seas, much as they do when humpback whales feed just outside the sandbars.

One thing does seem certain: The seals are here to stay. Each year, the frigid waters of our winter ocean offer up a new batch of seals. They hang out at some of the better breaks with surfers, and they hunt fish and haul out onto our beaches to sun and rest. Whether returning to historical patterns like the harbor seals, or bravely venturing into unchartered waters of a new world with warmer winters and ice-free springs like the harp seals, seals are a fact of life on our beaches. The Outer Banks is world-renowned to beachgoers and vacationers. After the crowds of summer have gone, seals are the visitors that many of us have come to anticipate. They are a lot more interesting than pasty-white tourists wearing Hawaiian shirts and socks with sandals.

Photographer and naturalist Jared Lloyd divides his time between Corolla and Jackson, Wyo.

THE Huntress OF STANLY COUNTY

Katie Watson got a late start deer hunting, but at 97 she's going strong.

The ancient Greeks worshipped Artemis, goddess of the hunt and nature. In Roman mythology, Artemis became Diana, also goddess of the hunt and wild animals.

The good people of Stanly County have Katie Watson, and although she is not a deity by any stretch, the fact that she's still hunting at 97 makes her the doyenne of ladies afield in the Piedmont, if not the entire Tar Heel state.

She's not a Joanie-come-lately to the sport, either. Miss Katie, the youngest of 11 children, started at a young age and with a little tutelage. That pioneering spirit has been a part of her life, in both vocations and avocations.

WRITTEN BY
MIKE ZLOTNICKI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MELISSA McGAW

"My dad wasn't a great hunter, but he'd go out and shoot a rabbit or a squirrel occasionally to feed the kids," she says, sitting on a couch in the living room of her ranch-style house. "I had a brother who was three years older than me who really liked to hunt, and he took me under his wing and taught me everything he knew about hunting. Woodrow was his name. We hunted and made slingshots and did all those things kids do."

Miss Katie sits on a couch, leaning toward her guest to better hear the questions. Her responses are measured and concise; her voice, soft and throaty. Her grandnephew Wes Sells is sitting in an easy chair nearby. Her living room is country chic; the wood-paneled walls are adorned with turkey fan mounts and an 8-point buck shoulder mount. The fireplace mantel sports a merganser mount and turkey spurs. Overhead, a chandelier made of gourds illuminates the room. A stack of magazines is next to Sells' chair, and the current issue of *Outdoor Life* sits atop. During deer season, Sells helps Miss Katie get to and from deer stands. He also helps around the house and makes sure that visitors' intentions are good. He sits quietly as Miss Katie recalls her youth.

"I got my first doll at 6 years old," she says. "When I opened it I said, 'I wanted a knife!' "

"Woodrow let me shoot my first rabbit—I can't remember if it was a shotgun or rifle—when I was 10," she says. "He already had a little ol' single-barrel shotgun. I would think I shot the rabbit with the shotgun, but I don't really remember for sure if it was a rifle or a shotgun. I've been hunting ever since."

There weren't any deer—Miss Katie's favorite quarry—to hunt in Stanly County during her formative years. Sells says he saw his first deer in 1982. He also tells of an old family rumor that in

the early 1960s, some of Watson's kinfolk saw a deer track and promised "not to tell Katie," such was her reputation as a hunter. Miss Katie giggles as Sells tells of it. Small game was the order of the day during the Great Depression and the years following. Rabbits, squirrels and other critters were often part of dinner.

"I used to have a picture where I had 15 squirrels nailed up on a door," Miss Katie says as she flips through old pictures. "I went that morning and I went that evening. There wasn't too much other stuff to hunt. We went hunting at night for 'possum. When I was growing up there wasn't a lot of other food to eat, so we ate 'possum. My mother could cook 'em pretty good, but I wouldn't eat one now."

She chuckles as she starts thumbing through a stack of old pictures and newspaper clippings.

Top: Katie Watson trained quail dogs, like these pointers, for herself and others when she was younger. She also enjoys turkey hunting and does her own calling in the blind. Opposite: Up until she was 90 she was hunting out of an elevated blind dubbed "Katie's Condo." An ATV is handy for getting to and from hunting spots. Grandnephew Wes Sells assists with deer hunting chores.

"Tell him about your quail hunting," Sells suggests.

"I trained dogs for a distant cousin of mine," she says. "I was a pretty good trainer. Pointers." She flips through some pictures and laments the current quail population. "This is me, and this is a grandnephew of mine with pointers [the picture is dated 1951]. The quail population has disappeared. There's just not any quail. There's not enough for a person to even keep a quail dog. You'd walk and walk and maybe not even find a quail all day."

Sells leans forward and speaks so Miss Katie can hear from across the room.

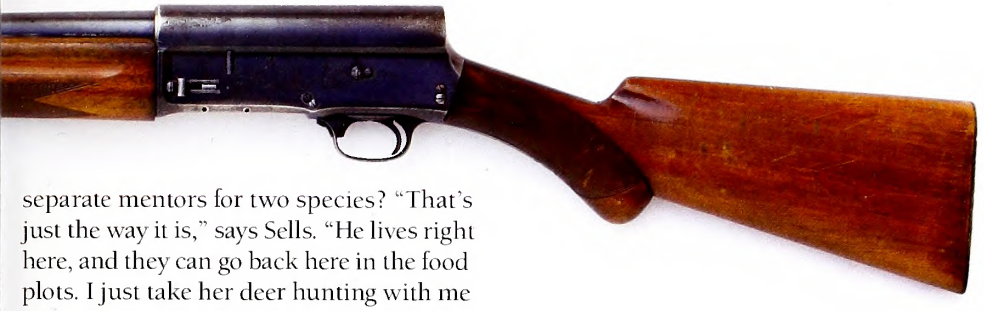
"There's 50 years between me and her," he says, "and when I was 12 or 13 my parents were still at work, and when she came home from work I came across the road, and we went quail hunting. I started going hunting with her when I was about 8 and carrying a gun when I was 12. I waited for her to get home, and we loaded up the dogs in her Blazer and went quail hunting. In the summertime, it was fishing."

Ah, yes, the fishing. When Miss Katie is not waiting for deer or turkeys, she enjoys bream fishing with a fly rod so used that her handprint is embedded in the cork. She flips to another dog-eared picture from her stack. "I fish a lot here in the pond and in a neighbor's pond," she says. "Here's a picture of 42 bream I caught in two hours from a neighbor's pond."

"You don't want to fish behind her," says Sells. Miss Katie beams as her grandnephew speaks. She enjoys her stature in the community. Revels in it, even.

She tells of being good enough in high school basketball to be asked to play for the boys' team. Following high school, she went to work in a local hosiery mill, where she repaired her own machine so many times the company made her a "fixer," as she calls it. The other female employees were wearing skirts when she started with the wrenches. She wore the trousers of a fixer for the next 34 years and through three husbands before retiring at 62.

During the conversation another grandnephew, Kevin Barringer, stops by the house. Barringer is her turkey mentor. Why two



separate mentors for two species? "That's just the way it is," says Sells. "He lives right here, and they can go back here in the food plots. I just take her deer hunting with me down in New London. And she still hunts some here, too, but on her own. She's killed 43 deer since she turned 80."

Miss Katie was asked if she did her own calling in the turkey blind. Whether she uses instant grits or frozen pie crusts might have made a better question.

"I do my own calling!" she says loudly, shaking her finger. "Yes, sir, I sit in my own blind and do my own calling."

Up until she was 90, she hunted deer in an elevated box stand dubbed "Katie's Condo" that she made herself. Sells said they made her start hunting from a ground blind five or six years ago. She admits that she's not too keen on morning hunts now. "I'd rather go of an evening," she says.

At one point, Miss Katie gets up and brings a rifle and then a shotgun. The shotgun is a Belgian-made Browning bought at Lowder's Hardware in Albemarle a few decades ago. "I killed a pile of quail with that gun," she says as she cradles the receiver. The worn bluing and weathered wood complement her hands. Since Miss Katie's quail days, the gun has become her turkey slayer, and someone has welded a garish turkey choke to the end of the barrel. It may be effective, but it gives off a cleats-on-a-ballerina vibe.

The deer rifle is a Remington 742 chambered in the venerable .30–06. The cartridge was introduced in 1906, 10 years before Miss Katie was born. The .30–06 seems like a lot of gun for a lady slight of build. When asked why she chose it, she says simply: "I had a .30–30, but I needed more power. The .30–06 was the most popular gun in my area." She also has a Hawken muzzleloader for blackpowder season.

Miss Katie loves her venison, and she always ages her deer for a week at a local processor. She prepares her venison "country style," as she calls it. She cuts backstrap into cubes, sprinkles it with garlic salt and then beats it with a mallet. After refrigerating it overnight, she rolls it in flour and fries it. For quail, she'd dust it with flour, fry it on both sides and then simmer it in water, making a brown gravy to ladle over rice. Sells says "wow" and face-palms as Miss Katie describes a favorite meal of his childhood.

Hunting—especially deer hunting—is more than an outing in the woods for Miss Katie. It seems to keep her young, and it keeps her connected to two of the most important men in her life.

"They mean an awful lot to me," she says, nodding toward the men across the room. "They take me places I certainly couldn't go by myself. They make sure everything is all right. My outdoors activity is dependent upon them, although I still take my four-wheeler locally by myself." She grins and talks of hunting in the fall, "if my health is good and I've still got it up here," she says, pointing to her head.

By all accounts, she will. Miss Katie had surgery over the summer but is back home and should be in the deer woods as you read this. You can be sure that Wes Sells or Kevin Barringer will be ready to answer their cellphones with news of another deer for Miss Katie Watson, the huntress of Stanly County.

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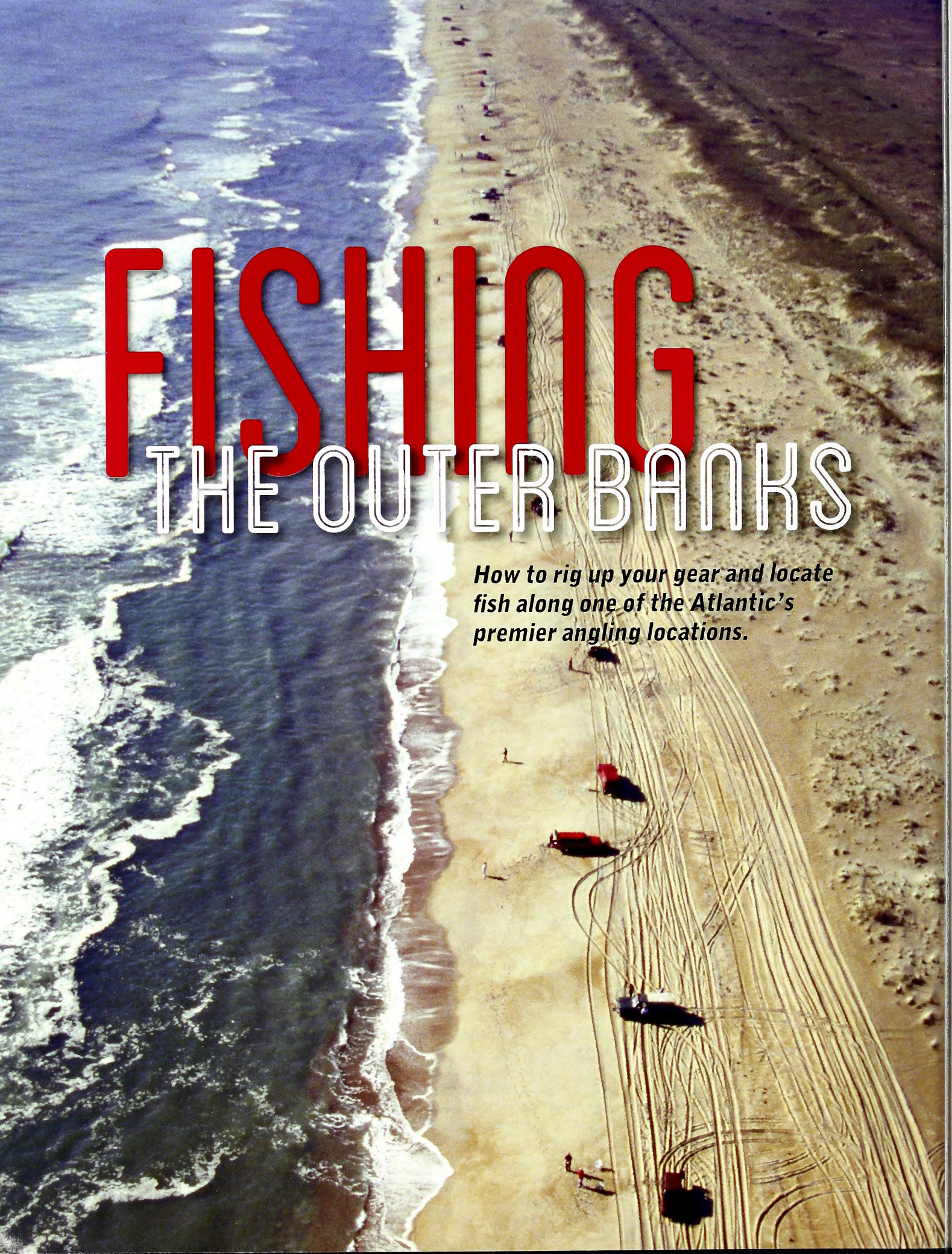

FISHING THE OUTER BANKS

How to rig up your gear and locate fish along one of the Atlantic's premier angling locations.

Written by Stan Ulanski
Photographed by Kelly Culpepper

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT NO FORM OF ANGLING CAN MATCH THE THRILL AND EXCITEMENT OF SURF FISHING, as waves crash against the shore, marauding predators chase bait into the shallows, and long, arcing casts reach far-off fish. And it has also been said that the Outer Banks rank as one of the premier surf fishing sites along the Atlantic coast. That the number of surf fishermen has grown dramatically over the years seems to support these claims. When schools of bluefish, red drum and other species churn the nearshore waters, anglers line the beaches, sometimes shoulder to shoulder, to cast their baits and lures.

There are a variety of fish that swim within the cast of a surf angler. The spectrum of sizes, speeds and feeding habits of these fish necessitates a variety of rods and other tackle. While I have seen numerous off road vehicles carrying a dozen or more rods, your arsenal need not be as extensive. You can cover most surf fishing situations with three rods that are designated by their respective lengths and ability to cast a certain weight or lure.

A good start for most anglers who are targeting red drum, big bluefish and striped bass is a rod in the 10- to 12-foot range that is capable of casting a large chunk of bait and 4- to 6-ounce sinkers a distance of about 200 to 250 feet and, at times, even farther. A long rod has a distinct mechanical advantage over a short rod in achieving long casts because the tip of the longer rod sweeps out a greater distance during the casting motion than does the shorter rod. This action results in a longer period of accelerating and loading the rod through the casting stroke—both necessary for those desired long casts. Loading the rod refers to the potential energy stored in the bend of the rod that is released when the rod uncoils during the cast. The rod is bent by the weight (sinker or lure) when the rod is started forward in the casting motion.

In addition to the importance of the length of the rod in achieving distance, the stiffness of the rod now enters the picture. A supple rod will subtract from the distance because the rod will bend excessively as the force builds up at the rod tip to propel the weight forward. The rod simply cannot be loaded properly. In contrast, a relatively rigid rod will not bend as much during the application of the force, but it increases the efficiency of the casting stroke by bending just enough to load the rod to its maximum specification. In summary, the rod acts as a lever, albeit a complicated one, transferring energy supplied by the caster and storing some of the energy. Many anglers who target big red drum often use "Hatteras heavers," long rods in the 12-to 13-foot range, capable of tossing an 8-to-10-ounce sinker and a large chunk of bait.

A shorter rod, generally 9 feet, can serve a dual purpose: cast small bottom rigs (2 to 3 ounces) that target smaller species, like flounder, kingfish and pompano, and propel lures (1 to 2 ounces) to Spanish mackerel and bluefish that are intent on chasing down fleeing baitfish. Being relatively light in weight, this rod allows the angler to cast repeatedly without quickly tiring.

The shortest rod, in the 7-foot range, will comfortably cast small lures (less than a half-ounce) and jigs (about a quarter-ounce) to species, like seatrout, that swim and forage at times close to the shore. This rod simply does not have the length or stoutness to cast long distances. While the range of surf species that can be targeted with this rod is limited, it can also be used for pier or sound fishing.

Choosing a reel to match your rod often comes down to a matter of preference and your proficiency in casting. Many seasoned surf anglers will match their longest rod with a conventional reel that they load with 15 to 20-pound test line. With this type of reel, the spool rotates when the line is pulled off the spool due to the force of the cast. The advantages of conventional reels are threefold: heavier line can be packed on the spool, there is increased torque for playing large fish, and the angler can make longer casts. With regard to the latter, obviously the skill of the caster comes into play, but since the spool rotates during the cast, the line "flows" off the spool effortlessly. The downside of these reels, particularly for the novice angler, is the learning curve, albeit not too steep, required to master the nuances of the rapidly rotating spool. Spool rotations reach thousands of revolutions per minute, and if the angler cannot control the spool's speed, the result is the dreaded "bird's nest"—a tangled mass of line embedded into the spool. Fortunately, reel manufacturers have come up with ways to control the rotational speed and have made conventional reels more user-friendly.

Suffice it to say that the angler's other option, a spinning reel, is more than capable of both casting a heavy weight and fighting a big fish. With a spinning reel, the spool does not rotate during the cast. Because the line is

Clockwise: Beach transportation takes many forms, including this modified van. Twitch baits like the MirrOlure are popular artificial lures for trout and drum. Ample beach access for anglers has helped parts of the Outer Banks become a destination for surf anglers. The Point at Cape Hatteras is pictured.

pulled from the spool in a series of loops by the sinker or lure, air resistance and friction, which are caused by the loops traveling through the rod's guides, reduce casting distance. But on the upside, spinning reels are generally easier to use than conventional reels for most people because massive tangles are essentially nonexistent.

Line twist is inevitable with a spinning reel, particularly after repeated casts. The twisting not only compromises the integrity of the line but significantly affects casting distance. The problem can be minimized by not reeling when a fish is taking line and manually closing the bail after a cast.

A 9-foot rod and a spinning reel loaded with 10-to 12-pound test line is the preferred outfit when the angler must cast repeatedly in order to catch the attention of a fast-swimming predator. In the heat of the moment and with adrenalin pumping, even experienced anglers often make casting mistakes. The spinning reel is just more forgiving than the conventional reel in this situation. However, if you feel up to it, by all means experiment with a small conventional reel.

CASTING IS A FUNDAMENTAL SKILL THAT EVERY SURF ANGLER SHOULD DEVELOP.

There is no debate about matching the light, 7-foot rod with a small spinning reel that is capable of holding 100 yards of 6-pound test line. Remember that you will be casting light lures or jigs that are simply not heavy enough to initiate spool rotation on a conventional reel.

Enter any tackle shop, peruse any fishing catalog, and you will quickly note the myriad sinkers, hooks, lines, lures, plugs, and jigs that are available in all sizes, shapes, weights and colors. How to choose? My advice is to keep it simple, limit your selection, and use those rigs that over time have proven successful in these waters. Seek advice—we're all novices at one point.

When fishing for red drum, though not limited to this species, many anglers will use a fish-finder rig. Its main feature is that the heft of the sinker does not spook the fish, since this weight rides freely up the line when the fish picks up the bait. Relatively recently, circle hooks (6/0 to 9/0), rather than J-shaped hooks, have become an integral part of this rig. Circle hooks have the advantage of becoming lodged in the corner of the fish's mouth after hookup, preventing the fish from deeply swallowing the offering. In contrast, deep hooking may result in the death of a released fish, which negates the purpose of size and bag limits. Baits include chunks of mullet or menhaden.

Fishing for smaller bottom fish, such as pompano and kingfish (whiting), necessitates scaling down your rig; smaller sinkers and hooks are in order. While many anglers simply use a smaller hook on a fish-finder rig, a two-hook or even three-hook bottom rig is generally more effective and holds more bait. Multiple hookups are thus possible, particularly, with kingfish that generally swim in relatively large schools. Anglers may employ a variety of natural baits, including pieces of squid, shrimp, bloodworms and sand fleas.

No area probably generates more debate within the surf fishing community than which lure to toss to bluefish or to Spanish mackerel that are actively feeding on small baitfish. If you choose a lure that mimics what the game fish is feeding on and is aerodynamically shaped for casting, you will generally have your share of hookups. Metal lures, such as Kastmasters, Hopkins and Stingsilvers, in the 1-to 3-ounce range have all proven successful in catching myriad species over the years. Many of these lures come in a variety and combination of colors, and all have their advocates among Outer Banks anglers. While many fish can indeed perceive color, there is no hard evidence that supports one colored lure over another in consistently catching fish. You can't go wrong with silvered lures that reflect sunlight well, provide that attractive "flash," and match in coloration some of the major forage species, like Atlantic silversides, of bluefish and Spanish mackerel.

Your tackle box should include both bucktails and jigs. These leadhead lures, which are adorned with a synthetic dressing on their hook, are deadly on some bottom-feeders. A 1-ounce bucktail, slowly retrieved along the bottom, often proves irresistible to a flounder that is waiting patiently to ambush its prey. Many surf anglers who target spotted seatrout use quarter to half-ounce jigs. When bounced along the bottom, the undulating motion of the curly, rubber tail on the hook often entices a strike from trout that are feeding relatively close to the shore.

Casting is a fundamental skill that every surf angler should develop. You simply can't catch fish if you can't place your bait or lure where the fish can see and/or smell it. All anglers should concentrate on technique—developing an efficient casting stroke that allows consistent placement of an offering in the target zone. Accuracy over distance should be an angler's top priority. Once you achieve confidence in your casting style, you can add long casts to your repertoire.

Since there are many excellent books that provide detailed instructions and photographs for a variety of specific casts, I will attempt only to outline the principles that are intrinsic to all casts:

1. The rod, reel, weight and line must be a matched and harmonious unit; otherwise, the caster's physical effort goes for naught and results in a dismal cast. Trying to cast an 8-ounce sinker with a willowy 7-foot rod is a sure recipe for failure.
2. Timing is more important than strength in casting. While it is certainly true that the angler's physical size confers some advantage with regard to achieving a long cast, most surf casts will be well short of the distances (500 to 600 feet) reached by professional casters in tournaments. Accelerating the rod, stopping the rod and releasing the line—all parts of the casting stroke—need to be choreographed together to achieve an accurate cast.
3. To effectively load a long surf rod, first begin with 3 to 4 feet of line between the rod tip and the rig and then start the cast slowly. If the cast is initially rushed, the rig will move too fast and prevent the rod from bending properly. Once the rig is moving, accelerate the rod to reach maximum speed just before the end of the casting stoke. At this stage, the rod will be fully loaded.
4. Proper technique calls for pushing the section of the rod above the reel with your right hand and pulling near the butt with the left hand during the acceleration period. (Reverse the hand placement if your left hand is dominant.)
5. Stopping the rod abruptly after acceleration is critical to releasing the energy stored in the loaded rod.
6. The lure or rig will travel in the direction the rod tip moves just before you stop the rod. If the tip points to the right of the intended target, accuracy suffers, your line might cross the lines of fellow anglers and distance decreases markedly.
7. The casting arc, the distance the rod tip moves during the cast, is short for short casts and long for long casts.

LOCATING FISH

While many factors make up a successful surf fishing outing, probably none is more important to the angler than the ability to "read the water"—to analyze where and how waves break to determine the structure of the sandy bottom. As waves roll in from deeper water, they will slow down because the shallow

NATURE'S WAYS

How Do Surf Fishing Holes Form?

See Nature's Ways, page 43.

bottom exerts a frictional drag on their forward movement. The decrease in wave speed results in a shortening of the wave (wave length decreases) but a vertical growth of the wave (wave height increases). The waves will grow until they become unstable and, like a house of cards, topple over in the form of breakers. Since water depth is the main factor controlling breaker formation, waves break in shallow water and not over holes, depressions, and sloughs. Scanning the water reveals places where waves are breaking in one place but not in another.

If the seafloor within the nearshore zone has a flat, gentle slope, which is representative of many of the beaches along the Outer Banks, the incoming waves break gradually over a wide swath of the nearshore zone. These breakers are known as spillers because they break by spilling water from the crest down the front face of the wave. Being able to recognize these breakers is a clue to the observant angler that the bottom is relatively homogenous and lacks any significant bottom features that may attract both prey and predator alike on a regular basis. This shallow, unremarkable bottom may warrant a couple of casts, but time is better spent searching for more productive sites.

Along stretches of the Outer Banks, the nearshore bottom takes on a more interesting appearance, at least from the perspective of the angler. Sandbars are the most common type of bottom structure found within the nearshore zone. They can stretch for miles along the beach and are evident where the waves crest and break in the form of plunging breakers. These plunging breakers are curling waves that form when the seafloor slope changes rather abruptly. As a result, the crest of the wave travels fast enough to outrun the rest of the wave and plunges downward until it crashes into the trough preceding the wave. Coupled with the sandbar is a slough, often quite deep, which separates the sandbar from the beach. The slough is revealed by the absence of breakers. In essence, waves will break over the bar, reform in the slough, and finally break against the shoreline, dissipating their energy.

Once you can recognize this basic bottom structure, the next step in the process is deciding where to place your offering. Fish such as spotted seatrout and kingfish will generally cruise the slough; they feel comfortable there because the deeper water affords them a certain degree of anonymity in their search for food. Also, small baitfish, the major forage items for many game fish, are often concentrated in the slough, so the optimal location for lobbing a chunk of bait would be into the slough. Some anglers initially place their offering on the sandbar and then let it tumble into the slough. This erratic movement often catches the attention of a fish that is holding near the bottom and waiting for food items to be washed down to it by the breaking waves.

If there is an opening in the bar, as evidenced by the lack of breaker activity, this can be a prime site to fish. The breach provides a conduit for both game fish and bait to move inside the bar. A well-placed cast near this opening will often intercept a variety of predators, both small and large, as they search out their prey.

There are stretches within the seashore that are marked by two sandbars and two sloughs that run parallel to the beach. In this situation, two sets of breakers will be visible over the sandbars; the outer sandbar will have larger breakers than the inner sandbar, and the sloughs will have little or no breaker activity. As with the above case, the sloughs often prove to be productive, but the outer slough will entail a longer cast that may be beyond the ability of some anglers.

For the novice surf angler, scanning the nearshore region during low tide rather than high tide may prove more productive in locating sandbars and sloughs. When there is a minimum amount of water covering the bottom, all of the structure may be visible, and subtle variations in bottom topography, which may hold fish, become evident. The downside is that during very low tides the water depth in the slough may be too shallow to attract fish, and the angler should return at high tide.

Another surf structure that is attractive to game fish is an "out-suck," more appropriately known as a rip current—a small-scale nearshore current moving away from the beach at a relatively high speed. Rip currents form as water in the surf zone is continuously transported to the beach. In the long run, the water cannot simply accumulate on the beach, but it must flow back through the surf zone in narrow corridors. The return flow through these corridors consists of all the water that

RIP CURRENTS CAN BE MAGNETS FOR GAME FISH LIKE STRIPED BASS AND RED DRUM...

Opposite, waders are a must in the fall, especially for maximum casting distance. Gulls await the scraps at a crowded fish-cleaning table. Dressing fish and icing them as soon as possible makes for better table fare.

was transported toward the shore over a broader width of beach. A rip current has three parts: feeder currents that flow parallel to the beach, the neck in which the feeder currents converge and flow through the breakers in a narrow corridor, and the head in which the current weakens and widens beyond the breaker line in deeper water. Anglers can recognize rip currents by looking for these clues: a channel of choppy water; an area having a notable difference in water color or turbidity; a band of foam, seaweed, or debris moving steadily away from the beach; and a break or disruption in the incoming wave pattern. From beach level, rip currents may be difficult to see; anglers will obtain a better view of the water conditions by climbing a dune. Rip currents can be particularly strong during storm conditions and may also increase in strength during low tide. Anglers, particularly those burdened with heavy tackle and waders, need to be cognizant of the danger of wading near the strong outflow.

Rip currents can be magnets for game fish like striped bass and red drum, which are comfortable in moving, swirling water. Their broad tails allow them to efficiently navigate the rip current and ambush small prey that are swept away from the inner slough by the strong flow. These species will often congregate around the head of the rip current where there are deeper holes, but under the cover of darkness, they may move into the neck and even into the feeder zones. Anglers should attempt to cover all the parts of the rip current with their casts; however, if the head extends beyond the outer sandbar, long casts are needed to reach this target zone.

You should be aware that this stretch of the North Carolina coast is quite dynamic; the shoreline and the nearshore zone change frequently due to seasonal variations in wave size and direction, currents, and storms. A section of the beach that was productive during one time of the year because of its unique structure might have changed considerably over time and may now hold few fish. It is incumbent upon the angler to search out new "fishing holes."

Stan Ulanski is professor of geology and environmental science at James Madison University and a passionate angler.

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Sweet, sweet, sweet, sweeeeee!
You see them at the feeder and hear their calls daily, but what do you really know about these

Small Songsters, the Sparrows

written by Susan Carl / illustrated by Consie Powell / nature activity by Anne M. Runyon

White-throated sparrows have two distinct color variations that influence their mating choices. The "tan-striped" birds have tan and brown stripes on the crown, while the "white-striped" birds have white and black crown stripes. White-throated sparrows tend to mate with opposite colored birds, so the two plumages remain in the population. The color variation is not related to the age or sex of the sparrows. The "white-striped" birds are often dominant and more aggressive, especially during breeding season.

Some of the most common birds in North Carolina are sparrows. During the colder months, we see more white-throated sparrows at backyard feeders than any other bird. Year-round, song sparrows and chipping sparrows make their home in great numbers throughout much of the state. These birds have adapted to habitats favored by humans and are thriving in suburban neighborhoods. Other sparrows in North Carolina require more specialized environments and are not seen as readily.

CHIPPING SPARROW

FAMILY MATTERS

Sparrows in North America belong to the family Emberizidae, or New World sparrows. Juncos and towhees are also in this family. These birds feed and nest close to the ground. Sparrows are small, brown-patterned birds with rounded wings and conical bills for cracking seeds. Male and female sparrows are typically very similar in size and plumage. Telling different species apart may require a sharp eye and a good field guide.

Some sparrow species migrate in winter and some don't. Those that migrate don't fly very far, generally staying in the southern United States. In the Appalachians, some species simply relocate to lower and warmer altitudes in the same region when weather turns chilly.

SONG SPARROW

PARENTAL GUIDANCE

By springtime, sparrows begin their courtship rituals and nest building. Female birds build a cup-shaped nest on or near the ground and incubate the eggs. Because these nests are more vulnerable to predation than those found high in trees, many sparrow species use distraction displays to protect the eggs. Adult birds flutter a short distance from the nest, then feign injury in the hope that predators will see them as an easy meal and follow. After the predator is lured from the nest, the parent flies safely away.

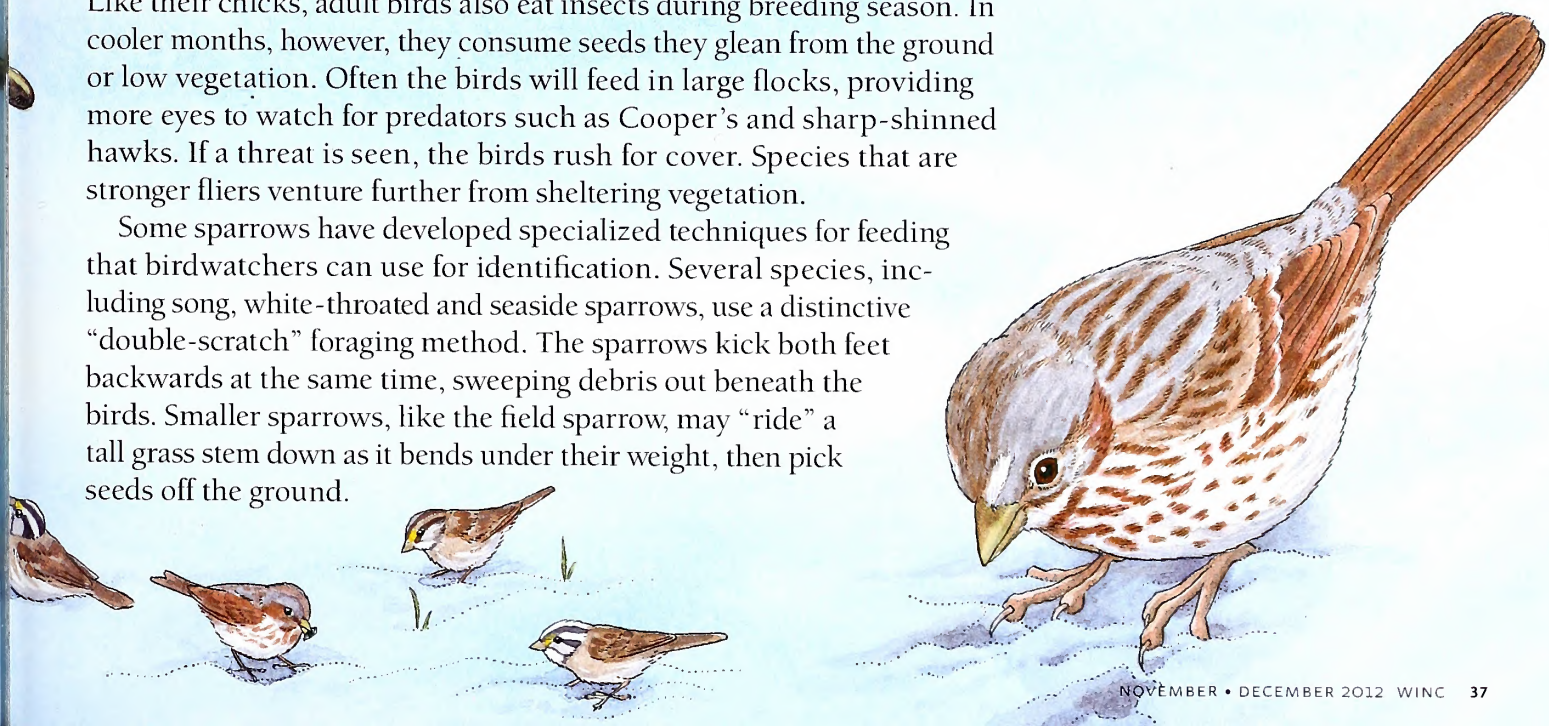
For further protection, the legs of sparrow chicks mature rapidly. Although they are born helpless without feathers or sight, by nine days of age the chicks' legs have grown to adult size and the birds can flee the nest on foot if necessary. Wings and flying skills develop later. Both parents feed the fledglings insects, particularly soft-bodied insects such as caterpillars. The male may take over care of the young, allowing the female to raise two or more broods per mating season.

FEEDING FRENZY

Like their chicks, adult birds also eat insects during breeding season. In cooler months, however, they consume seeds they glean from the ground or low vegetation. Often the birds will feed in large flocks, providing more eyes to watch for predators such as Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks. If a threat is seen, the birds rush for cover. Species that are stronger fliers venture further from sheltering vegetation.

Some sparrows have developed specialized techniques for feeding that birdwatchers can use for identification. Several species, including song, white-throated and seaside sparrows, use a distinctive "double-scratch" foraging method. The sparrows kick both feet backwards at the same time, sweeping debris out beneath the birds. Smaller sparrows, like the field sparrow, may "ride" a tall grass stem down as it bends under their weight, then pick seeds off the ground.

The fox sparrow is a handsome winter visitor throughout North Carolina that employs the "double-scratch" foraging style in snow and leaf litter. Smaller sparrows check out the resulting holes in the snow for leftover seeds.



FOR A SONG

Another good identification tool for sparrows is their vocalizations. Like other songbirds, sparrows have a complex vocal organ that can put forth a cascade of whistles, trills and warbles. Male song sparrows are well known for their complex mating calls. These songs warn away other suitors as well as attract female birds. Song sparrows continue to sing year-round, although not as frequently outside the breeding season. Most species of sparrows have many non-song vocalizations as well. Mating pairs often have a call note that allows them to locate one another, and many sparrows employ a piercing alarm call when an intruder is near.

The house sparrow shares a common name with sparrows in the Emberizidae family. However this bird is in another family, and is quite different from native sparrows. House sparrows were brought to the United States from England in the 19th century in an attempt to control insects. Their population increased rapidly and they are now one of the most abundant birds in the country. House sparrows displace Eastern bluebirds and other cavity nesters from nesting sites, reducing the population of native birds.

HOME IN THE GRASS

Beyond the sparrows commonly found in backyards, North Carolina is home to a number of species that prefer fields, pastures, and open woodlands with an understory of grass. The population counts of these birds, such as field, Bachman's and grasshopper sparrows, have declined as their habitat is converted to housing and cropland. Some grassland species, like the Henslow's and lark sparrows, only breed in a few very specific locations in the state where their habitat needs are met. Efforts to restore and protect native grasslands, one of the most threatened ecosystems in the country, will benefit these sparrows as well as other birds and wildlife.

Get Outside

Bird watchers can sharpen their identification skills by observing common backyard sparrows. Using a field guide, and binoculars if you have them, note the subtle differences in markings and plumage from one species to another. Bird song is another clue that experienced birders use, and is especially useful when the bird itself is secretive, like many sparrow species. Look for distinctive behavior like the "double scratch" foraging technique. What other identification tools can you use? To attract more birds to your backyard, consider making an inexpensive bird feeder and including millet, a preferred winter food for sparrows. The feeder can be as simple as a pie tin punched with drainage holes and set on top of pebbles on the ground or a tree stump. When traveling, look for sparrow species that you may not see in your own area.

Read and Find Out

- "Birds of the Carolinas" by Eloise F. Potter, James F. Parnell, Robert P. Teulings and Ricky Davis, University Of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- "The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior" by David Allen Sibley, Alfred Knopf, 2001.
- "The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of Eastern North America" by Bill Thompson III, Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

On the World Wide Web:

- The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Bird Guide allaboutbirds.org/guide
- Birds of North Carolina nature123.net/ncbirds

Find out more about Project WILD Workshops and literature at the Wildlife Commission's website at ncwildlife.org.

The Wildlife Endowment Fund

An Investment for the Future

Established in 1981, the Wildlife Endowment Fund allows the Wildlife Resources Commission to accept tax-deductible contributions for wildlife conservation. Money from the sale of lifetime licenses is also placed in this fund. Your donation or purchase will ensure that North Carolina will have a rich wildlife heritage for generations to come.

Lifetime License Form

Infant and Youth *(check appropriate block)*:

☐ Sportsman Infant $200
(under 1 year old—Application must be received before applicant has attained 1 year of age.)

☐ Unified Sportsman/Coastal Recreational Fishing Infant $275
(under 1 year old—Application must be received before applicant has attained 1 year of age.)

☐ Sportsman Youth $350
(ages 1 through 11—Application must be received before applicant has attained 12 years of age.)

☐ Unified Sportsman/Coastal Recreational Fishing Youth $450
(ages 1 through 11—Application must be received before applicant has attained 12 years of age.)

A copy of the birth certificate must accompany applications for infant and youth licenses. Birth certificate documentation cannot be returned.

Note: Pending satisfactory completion of the hunter safety course, persons who possess infant or youth licenses may exercise the privileges thereof when accompanied by an adult who is properly licensed to hunt in North Carolina. "Accompanied" is defined as maintaining a proximity to the hunter which enables the adult to monitor the activities of, and communicate with, the hunter at all times.

Adult (age 12 or older) *(check appropriate block)*:

☐ Comprehensive Inland Fishing $250
(N.C. residents only—includes basic inland fishing, trout & trout waters on game lands)

☐ Comprehensive Hunting $250
(N.C. residents only—includes basic hunting, big game, game lands & N.C. waterfowl)

☐ Sportsman $500
(N.C. residents only age 12 or older—includes basic hunting & inland fishing, big game, game lands, trout & N.C. waterfowl)

☐ Coastal Recreational Fishing $250
(N.C. residents only—includes coastal recreational fishing)

☐ Unified Sportsman/Coastal Recreational Fishing $675
(N.C. residents only—includes same privileges as the Sportsman, plus coastal recreational fishing)

A federal waterfowl stamp must be purchased separately for all N.C. hunting licenses.

Note: On or after July 1, 1991, a person, regardless of age, may not procure a hunting license or hunt in North Carolina without producing a certificate of competency for completing the hunter safety course or a hunting license effective prior to July 1, 1991, or by signing the statement below that he or she had such a license.

Check appropriate block and attach required copy:

☐ Copy of Prior Year Hunting License

☐ Copy of Hunter Safety Certificate of Competence

☐ In lieu of copy, I am signing the statement below:

Statement: I certify that I was a licensed hunter prior to July 1, 1991.

Signature _____ Date _____

Visit us online at www.ncwildlife.org or call 1-888-248-6834 for a complete list of lifetime licenses, including those for nonresidents and 65 and older.

Lifetime License

Complete the following information if applying for a lifetime license.
Be sure to check appropriate block(s) on reverse side *(please print legibly)*:

Name of Applicant _____

Daytime Phone _____

Mailing Address _____

Resident Address _____

County _____ Date of Birth _____ Driver License # _____

E-mail Address _____

Is this license a gift? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, mail license to ☐ Donor or ☐ Applicant.

License Donor's Name *(if applicable)* _____

Donor's Telephone # _____

Donor's Mailing Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Method of Payment: ☐ Check ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct. # _____ Expires _____

Print name exactly as it appears on credit card _____

Cardholder's Signature _____ Date _____

Personalize your Lifetime License for an additional $5:
Indicate your selection of letters, numbers, dashes, periods, commas and /or blanks up to 6 spaces: ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Indicate your personal message including letters, numbers, dashes, periods, commas and /or blanks up to 21 spaces:

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Signature of Applicant or Donor _____ Date _____

Note: Only adult lifetime licenses may be purchased by phone or online (VISA or MasterCard only). Call toll-free (1-888-248-6834) or visit us at www.ncwildlife.org. Use this form to purchase infant and youth lifetime licenses by mail.

Tax-Deductible Contribution

☐ I wish to make a tax-deductible contribution to the Wildlife Endowment Fund. Enclosed is my check for $ _____. *(Credit card payments cannot be accepted.)*

Name _____

Daytime Phone _____

Mailing Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Make checks payable to: *Wildlife Endowment Fund*

Transactions are not considered final until the check has cleared the bank. Items purchased with a returned check will be made invalid. A service charge of up to $25 will be charged on any returned check. (N.C.G.S. 25-3-506)

Mail completed application and payment to:
NCWRC, License Section, 1707 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1707

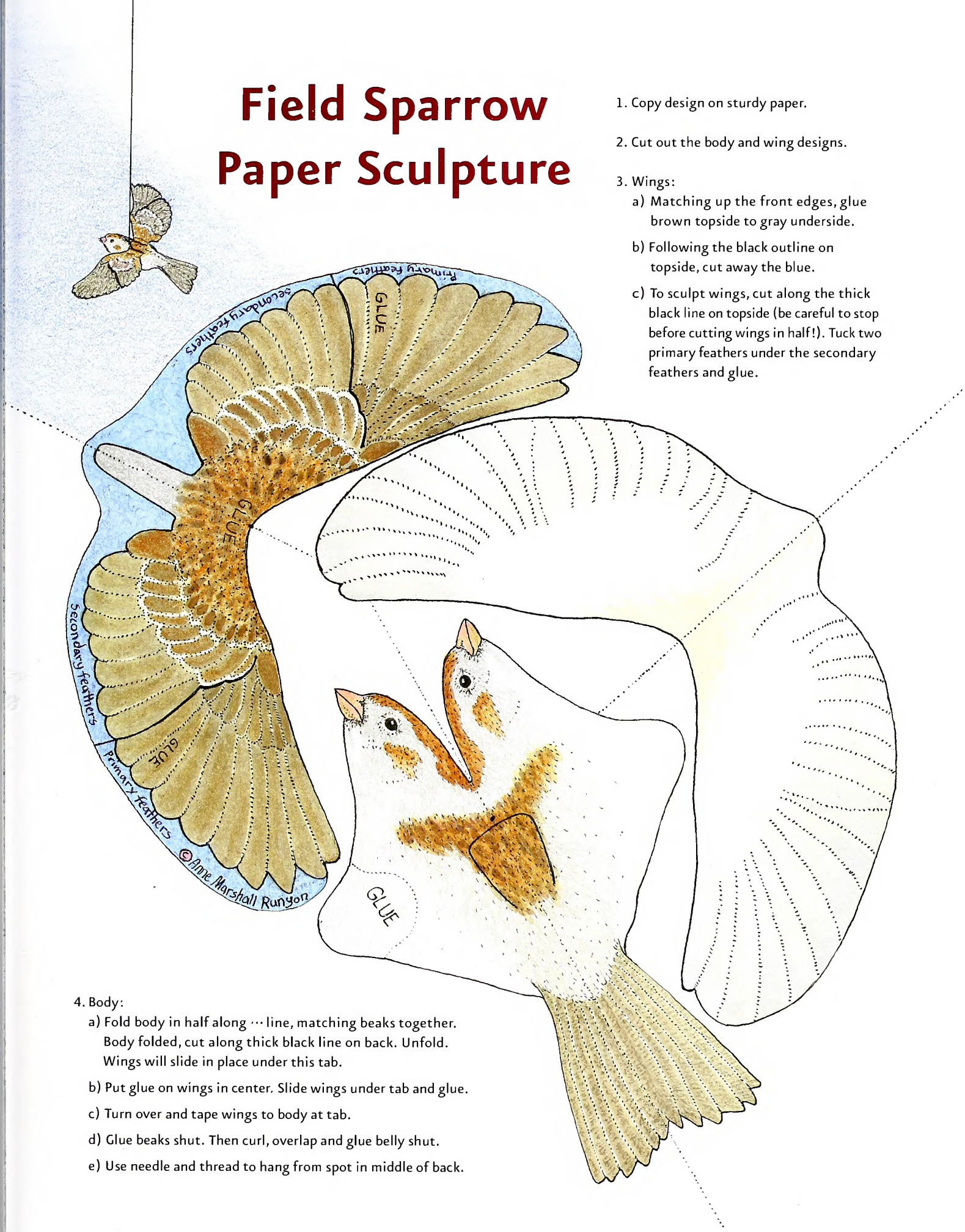
Office location: *NCSU Centennial Campus, 1751 Varsity Drive, Raleigh, N.C. 27606*
Telephone: 1-888-248-6834 (2HUNTFISH)

Field Sparrow Paper Sculpture

1. Copy design on sturdy paper.

2. Cut out the body and wing designs.

3. Wings:
   a) Matching up the front edges, glue brown topside to gray underside.
   b) Following the black outline on topside, cut away the blue.
   c) To sculpt wings, cut along the thick black line on topside (be careful to stop before cutting wings in half!). Tuck two primary feathers under the secondary feathers and glue.



4. Body:
   a) Fold body in half along ··· line, matching beaks together. Body folded, cut along thick black line on back. Unfold. Wings will slide in place under this tab.
   b) Put glue on wings in center. Slide wings under tab and glue.
   c) Turn over and tape wings to body at tab.
   d) Glue beaks shut. Then curl, overlap and glue belly shut.
   e) Use needle and thread to hang from spot in middle of back.

back porch

NEWS and NOTES

Edited by Mike Zlotnicki

MELISSA McGAW / NCWRC

Good News on the Outdoors Front

On Wall Street they say "the trend is your friend." It now applies to outdoor recreation. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation found that hunters nationwide increased by 9 percent while anglers grew by 11 percent. Nearly 38 percent of all Americans participated in wildlife-related recreation in 2011, an increase of 2.6 million participants from the previous survey in 2006. They spent $145 billion on related gear, trips and other purchases, such as licenses, tags and land leasing and ownership, representing 1 percent of the nation's gross domestic product.

Other key findings include:

• In 2011, 13.7 million people, 6 percent of the U.S. population 16 years old and older, went hunting. They spent $34 billion on trips, equipment, licenses, and other items in 2011, an average of $2,484 per hunter.

• More than 33 million people 16 and older fished in 2011, spending $41.8 billion on trips, equipment, licenses, and other items, an average of $1,262 per angler.

• More than 71 million people engaged in wildlife watching in 2011, spending $55 billion on their activities.

The National Survey is conducted every five years at the request of state fish and wildlife agencies to measure the importance of wildlife-based recreation to Americans. The 2011 Survey represents the 12th in a series since 1955. Developed in collaboration with the states, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and national conservation organizations, the survey has become one of the most important sources of information on fish and wildlife recreation in the country. The survey is funded through a multi-state conservation grant from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, which celebrates 75 years of conservation success in 2012.

The U. S. Census Bureau interviewed 48,627 households across the country to obtain samples of outdoors enthusiasts for detailed interviews. Information was collected through computer assisted telephone and in-person interviews.

e NEWSLETTER

Get N.C. Wildlife Update—news including season dates, bag limits, legislative updates and more—delivered to your Inbox from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. Sign up at ncwildlife.org/enews.

Two New Commissioners Sworn In

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission welcomed two new commissioners in August and honored a former commissioner for his years of service and leadership.

Spence

Clifton

James Garry Spence of Charlotte and V. Ray Clifton, Jr., of Clarkton were sworn in by Superior Court Judge Douglas Parsons at the August business meeting. A former Wildlife Commissioner, Parsons resigned from the commission earlier this year when Gov. Bev Perdue appointed him to the Superior Court bench for the 4-A Judicial District.

Spence will serve as an at-large Commissioner, appointed by President Pro Tempore of the N.C. Senate Phil Berger. Spence replaced Doc Thurston, who resigned in January. Spence will serve the remainder of Thurston's two-year term, which will end on June 30, 2013.

Clifton was appointed by Gov. Perdue as District 4 Commissioner to replace Judge Parsons in District 4. Clifton will serve the remainder of Parson's six-year term, which expires June 30, 2013.

Shortly after Judge Parsons administered the oath of office to Spence and Clifton, he was recognized by Wildlife Commission Chairman David Hoyle for his years of service and leadership to the commission.

Winterville Man Honored

MELISSA McGAW / NCWRC

Travis Casper, left, congratulates Kim Tavasso of Winterville.

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, during its August meeting, recognized Kim Tavasso, of Winterville, for his induction into the International Hunter Education Association Hall of Fame.

A special presentation was made to commemorate Tavasso's accomplishment. A 20-year volunteer with the North Carolina Hunter Education Program, he was inducted into the IHEA Hall of Fame on May 30, during the association's annual conference, held this year in Kansas City, Mo. The IHEA is a professional association for 67 state and provincial wildlife conservation agencies, and the 70,000 volunteers who teach hunter education in North America.

"This is quite the honor and to be honest, I am somewhat overwhelmed," Tavasso said. "I was surprised to receive it and it is hard to describe in words how large an honor it is. I am just grateful to the Wildlife Resources Commission and its Hunter Education Program to allow me to reach this level."

He estimates that he has taught well over 1,000 students hunter education in five counties. Tavasso, 60, is noted as a conservation leader and a trendsetter for hunting recruitment, according to Travis Casper, the state hunting education coordinator.

"This is someone who is responsible for thousands of people successfully completing hunter education, acquiring hunting licenses and enjoying countless hours of time outdoors," Casper said. "He is truly a hall of famer."

Tavasso retired from DuPont after 32 years. "Safety was a mandate at DuPont," he said. "Hunter education stresses safety and that was very appealing."

In addition to serving as a hunter education instructor, Tavasso supports Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament teams, National Wild Turkey Federation Jakes events and Youth Conservation Days for Pitt County Wildlife Club.

He serves as a guide at Camp Lejeune Wounded Warrior Hunts. The Wounded Warrior Program works to foster successful, well-adjusted wounded service members through a holistic approach when serving them and their families to nurture the mind and body, and encourage economic empowerment and engagement.

IN SEASON

In November and December, these seasons are open in North Carolina:

Black Bear: See *Regulations Digest* for seasons and locations.

Bobcat: Through Feb. 28.

Brant: Nov. 17–Dec. 1 and Dec. 15–Jan. 26.

Canada Goose and White-Front Goose: Resident Population Zone Nov. 10–Dec. 1; Dec. 15–Feb. 9. Southern James Bay Zone Nov. 10–Dec. 31.

Common Snipe: Nov. 14–Feb. 28.

Crow: Through Feb. 28.

Ducks, Coot and Mergansers: Nov. 10–Dec. 1 and Dec. 15–Jan. 26.

Feral Swine: No closed season.

Fox: See *Regulations Digest* for seasons and locations.

Hatchery Supported Trout Waters: Through Feb. 28.

Light Geese (Snow, Blue and Ross'): Nov. 10–March 9.

Mourning Dove: Nov. 19–Nov. 24 and Dec. 15–Jan. 11.

Pheasant: Nov. 17–Feb. 1.

Quail: Nov. 17–Feb. 28.

Rabbit: Nov. 17–Feb. 28.

Raccoon and Opossum: Through Feb. 28.

Rails, Gallinule and Moorhen: Through Nov. 9.

Ruffed Grouse: Through Feb. 28.

Squirrel: Gray and red through Feb. 28; fox through Dec. 31 in selected counties.

Tundra Swan: Nov. 10–Jan. 31 (by permit only).

White-tailed Deer: Eastern: Gun season through Jan. 1. Central: Muzzleloader season through Nov. 9; gun season Nov. 10–Jan. 1. Northwestern: Bow season through Nov. 2; muzzleloader season Nov. 3–Nov. 16; gun season Nov. 17–Jan. 1. Western: Bow season through Nov. 17; gun season Nov. 19–Dec. 8.

Woodcock: Dec. 13–Jan. 26.

Youth Waterfowl Day: Feb. 2. (An additional Youth Waterfowl Day will be held Feb. 9.)

There is no closed season or bag limit for groundhog, coyote, striped skunk, nutria and armadillo. There is an open season for taking beaver with firearms or bow and arrow during any other open season for the taking of wild animals.

Check the latest *North Carolina Inland Fishing, Hunting and Trapping Regulations Digest* for bag limits and applicable maps or visit ncwildlife.org.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Saturday–Sunday, Nov. 3–4

Fly-fishermen will enjoy the 4th Annual Western North Carolina Fly Fishing Expo at the Western North Carolina Agricultural Center in Asheville. Exhibitors, including the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, abound. Also there will be a local micro brewery beer tasting Saturday afternoon.

Go to wncflyfishingexpo.com for more information.

Saturday–Sunday, Dec. 1–2

The Core Sound Decoy Carvers Guild is dedicated to the preservation of the waterfowl carving heritage that runs deep through the history of the Core Sound area in North Carolina. The 25th Annual Core Sound Decoy Festival will be held at Harkers Island Elementary School.

The Core Sound Waterfowl Weekend, an annual celebration of heritage at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center, allows the Harkers Island community to throw open its doors, welcoming everyone to experience the natural beauty and maritime heritage of the area. This event is held at Core Sound Waterfowl Museum. Busses shuttle visitors from the school to the museum. Go to decoyguild.com and coresound.com for details.

Readers should check with the contact listed before traveling to an event. Items for listing should be conservation-oriented and should be submitted at least four months in advance to mike.zlotnicki@ncwildlife.org, or call (919) 707-0175.

LeGrand Earns Quay Award

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has awarded Dr. Harry E. LeGrand, Jr., a zoologist with the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, with one of its most prestigious awards, the Thomas L. Quay Wildlife Diversity Award. Gordon Myers, the Commission's executive director, presented LeGrand with the award, along with a plaque and framed wildlife print at the Commission's business meeting in August.

MELISSA McGAW / NCWRC

Dr. Harry LeGrand, Jr., center, is shown here with David Hoyle, Jr., left, chairman of the wildlife commissioners and Gordon Myers, executive director of the commission.

"Dr. Harry LeGrand, Jr., is one of the most precise and exacting scholars in the wildlife conservation science community today," Myers said. "His dedication, focus and expertise as a wildlife biologist and natural resources inventory specialist are just a few of the many reasons why he is so deserving of this honor."

LeGrand, a vertebrate biologist with the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, is the program's authority on the conservation of rare vertebrate animals and their habitats. He maintains the Rare Animal Listing published by the Natural Heritage Program and referenced by anyone who has an interest in rare animals.

During his 28-year career with the Natural Heritage Program, LeGrand has served in many capacities. He was an investigator on numerous natural area inventories. He has been instrumental in surveying and making recommendations for the dedication of state nature preserves across the state, which include commission game lands, state parks and state forests.

Like his former professor and the award's namesake, Dr. Thomas L. Quay, LeGrand is an avid volunteer and mentor. LeGrand is the seventh person to receive the honor, which recognizes individuals who make outstanding contributions to wildlife diversity in North Carolina and who are considered leaders in wildlife resources conservation. For more information about wildlife conservation in North Carolina, visit ncwildlife.org.

Money for Bobwhites

"Winter Roost" by Duane Raver

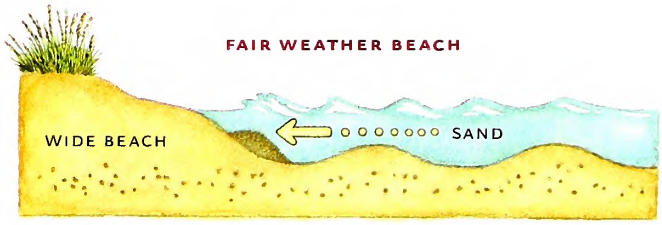
The North Carolina Wildlife Habitat Foundation is turning its efforts to helping quail habitat. Eddie Bridges, founder of the NCWHF, has partnered with several former Quail Unlimited chapters and created the N.C. Quail Habitat Fund.

To raise funds, Bridges asked noted wildlife artist Duane Raver to create a painting. "Winter Roost" was auctioned at the 2012 NCWHC annual Extravaganza and the proceeds added to the Quail Habitat Fund. A limited number of signed and numbered prints will be available for $60. To place an order call Bridges at (336) 375-4994.

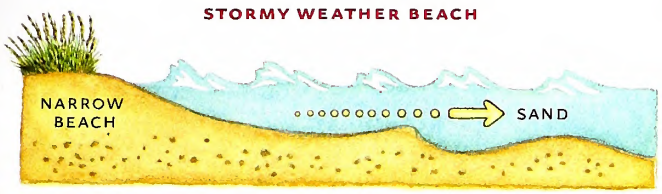
How Do Surf Fishing Holes Form?

written by Clyde Sorenson
illustrated by Jim Brown

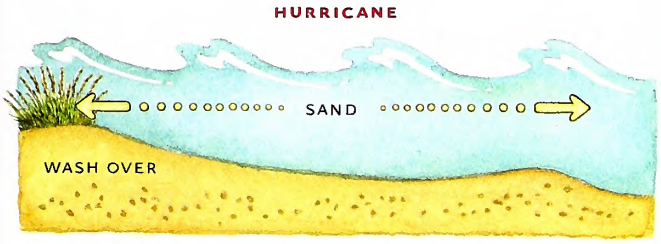
TO BE A SUCCESSFUL SURF ANGLER, you first have to find and recognize the holes, troughs, bars and cuts that form the structure where fish congregate. Beaches are among the most dynamic habitat systems in the world, and waves, wind, tides and major currents dictate their structure.



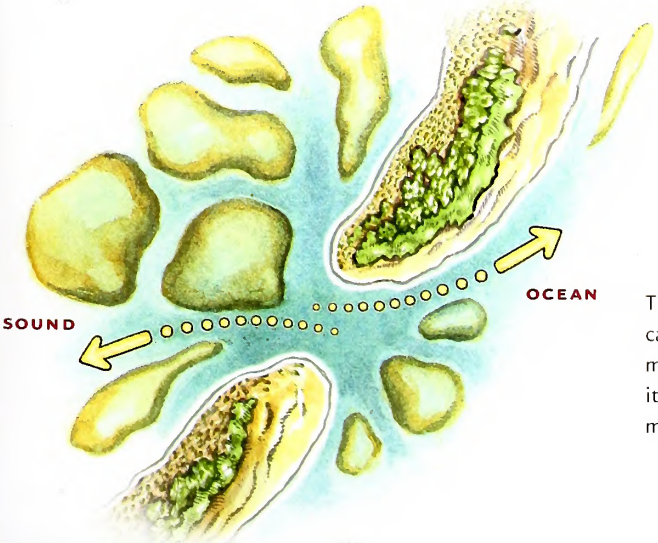
During prolonged periods of fair weather, with mild winds and small to moderate waves, the surf tends to transport sand from offshore bars towards the beach, since the energy of the breaking wave carries more sand farther shoreward than the lower energy returning water carries back to sea. Eventually, the berms of transported sand weld to the beach; in the meantime, they often form the narrow sloughs flounder and trout love. Cuts through the bars ("rips") provide places for water, and fish, to move in and out.



During stormy periods, with high wave energy and strong winds, the beach tends to flatten as the massive amounts of water moved onshore carry sand to deeper water (often feeding the bars that will again migrate shoreward during calm weather). Such flat beaches generally offer little good structure, although large rips can carve holes that hold fish.



Truly large storms, like hurricanes, often move tremendous amounts of sand off the beach and across the island. The sand-starved beach can take a very long time to recover from the flattening of the beach and the loss of sand.

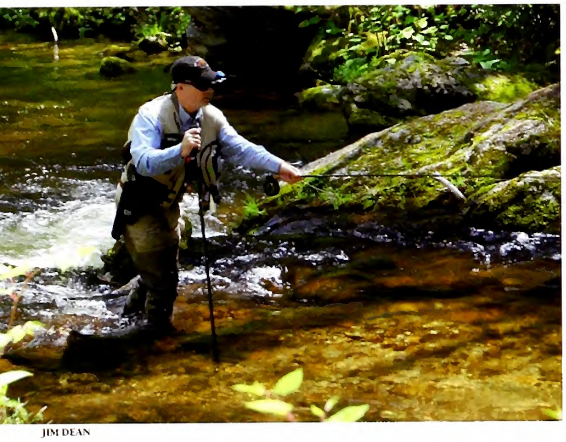


The complex tidal flows around inlets, and complex currents around capes, cause hard to predict movements of huge amounts of sand, making holes and sloughs appear and disappear with amazing rapidity. The dynamism and abundance of bars and holes around these major beach forms make them excellent places to fish.

A Fish Too Far

written by Jim Dean

It was such a subtle thing that it took me a while to appreciate what was happening. I had walked two miles downstream along the Henry's Fork in Idaho to claim a good spot to fish when the green drakes began hatching later that morning. This fabled hatch draws fly-fishermen from all over the world to catch the wild rainbow trout that eat those big mayflies. Fishermen were scattered up and down both banks waiting.



JIM DEAN

As the magic hour approached and the first drakes began to pop, a curious choreography evolved. Fishermen began to wade slowly across the river while looking for rising fish. Some stopped momentarily to cast to risers, but most continued their stealthy advance until we began to pass one another more or less in the middle. Stream ethics kept us politely separated, but by the time the hatch was in full progress, the transition was virtually complete.

"Something embedded deep in our psyche leads us to believe that better fishing always lies somewhere in the distant offing."

Almost without exception, the fishermen on my side of the river were now fishing along the opposite bank, while those who had entered the water from that side were now lined up in the water we had abandoned.

Many fishermen have a seemingly relentless compulsion to keep moving—to seek the far fish—and I had never witnessed such a near universal application of the theory. Non-fishermen would find it amusing, and a sociologist might take notes, but the predator/angler is simply a stalker by nature.

It's the old grass is greener syndrome, and it doesn't always profit anglers any more than it does cattle. Yet, when I think back over a lifetime of fishing, I can clearly see this influence. From the beginning, something embedded deep in our psyche leads us to believe that better fishing always lies somewhere in the distant offing, well beyond where we happen to be.

I was about 10 years old when I began fishing with my grandfather on an old millpond near our home in Halifax County. We would spend most of the time fishing the shorelines around the pond, usually with satisfactory results. But an irresistible force always drew us into the near impenetrable headwaters to thread our way up shallow channels through forests of overgrown stumps and tupelo. I suppose we hoped that some overlooked lunker awaited us. Never mind that there was seldom enough water to hold such promise, we never failed to explore it. All we ever got for our trouble were encounters with some impressively large and busy wasp nests.

Some similar adventurous urge probably accounts for the fact that I endeavored to fish most of the trout streams in western North Carolina over a period of some 40 years, often hiking miles up remote headwater tributaries until they were little more than spring runs. I saw some memorable country, and sometimes caught wild fish that had likely never seen a fly, but this clearly wasn't about catching bigger trout.

My old buddy A.J. Johnson loved this kind of fishing. We would hike miles to get to it, often passing up easier and more productive water to seek more distant streams. Even into his 70s, Johnson covered ground like an electro-prodded mountain goat, and I could always look forward to being stiff and sore for days after—"stove up" he called it.

No doubt, the quest for fish beyond the immediate horizon also pushes us to drive or fly to distant waters—the American West, Alaska, Patagonia, the Caribbean, where ever. If there is any grass to be found where we wind up, we are convinced it will be greener.

As I have gotten older, I fish closer to home more often, and my zeal for fishing in a driving rain or snowstorm has also diminished. Nor do I always feel obliged to use skills and tackle that are on the cutting edge of technology.

This past summer, I ambled out to the surf with a 7-foot spinning rod, a sand spike, folding chair and fresh shrimp and cold brews in a cooler. An occasional spot, sea mullet, pompano or flounder would have made me a happy puppy. But after two hours of catching nothing but pinfish, and running through a half a pound of shrimp that I could have steamed for supper, I decided there must surely be better sport somewhere else.

Years ago, I snapped an Achilles tendon and never fully recovered my agility. Though I can still walk a long way, I'm definitely slower. Even so, sitting on that beach in front of an ocean full of miniscule bait-stealers, I began to think of a trout stream I used to fish. The walk to the creek is a steep 2½ miles, and my favorite stretch lies nearly 2 miles farther upstream—a minimum 9-mile commitment even if I were fishing a flat sidewalk.

Still, I decided I wanted to fish that water at least one more time. I could do it, I thought, and even endure the "stove up" aftermath. This fall, perhaps? No fish is ever too far—until, of course, it is.

TODD PUSSER

White-tailed deer

OUTDOOR MOMENT

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